

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Hoping for Trouble in Iraq

by Jon B. Alterman

Few in the United States take much pleasure in what has happened in Iraq in recent days. Many in the Middle East do. Until Western governments understand Middle Eastern governments' motivations better, they won't have much influence on the violence unfolding in Iraq.

At first blush, it would seem obvious that anyone with any pretention of humanity would be appalled at the gains of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as ISIL or, by its Arabic acronym, Da'ish). Before taking over Mosul, Tikrit, and other cities north of Baghdad, the organization proved so extreme and murderous that even al Qaeda sought distance from it. Massacres and beheadings are ISIS's most common calling cards, but it also performs a large number of amputations and crucifixions, and then brags about them on social media.

How could anyone see their rise in Iraq as good news?

First, we'll discuss the easy case. For Bashar al-Assad, ISIS's spread to Iraq attracts attention to the brutality of his enemies and distracts from his own brutality in Syria. Assad wants the world to see his struggle as one against foreign jihadists without a shred of humanity rather than as a merciless civil war against his own citizenry. On a more tactical level, the opening of the battle space in Iraq draws some jihadists away from Syria and into Iraq, which means the jihadists are killing Iraqis and not Syrian soldiers. It also means even Assad's enemies are working to target the very people who are targeting him. Overall, ISIS's Iraq advance is great news for Assad.

For Iran, the calculations are a little more complicated. The Iranian leadership takes some comfort in the world sharing the same enemies as their clients in Syria. Equally importantly, the rise of ISIS makes the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki even more dependent on Iranian support, and thus more vulnerable to Iranian pressure. Iraqi nationalism runs strong, and Maliki has been careful to keep some distance between himself and the Iranians. With

(continued on page 2)

Foreign Exchange

Despite the vast differences between Saudi Arabia and the United States, or perhaps because of them, a flood of Saudi students has come to the United States.

In 2013, more foreign students in the United States came from Saudi Arabia than any country save three: China, India, and South Korea. The King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP), launched in 2005, has sent over 150,000 young Saudis abroad to pursue higher education. More than half of these scholarship students are choosing the United States for their training, and their overall numbers are increasing every year. According to the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission in Washington, 82,500 Saudis are currently studying in the United States, with the largest cohorts studying for their bachelor's degree or working principally on their English.

The scholarship is part of a long-term strategy to transition Saudi Arabia to a "knowledge society," strong in high-tech services and industries. But Saudis today worry aloud about what will happen as KASP students come home. Encouraging young people to take private sector jobs with less job security, lower pay, and longer work hours than public sector jobs has been hard, and it is not clear that KASP graduates will have different preferences than other young people entering the job market. In addition, no one is sure how young people, particularly women—who make up 28 percent of KASP students—will reintegrate socially. Will their peers respect them or resent them, and how will their new bosses respond to them? Almost a decade in, the answers are important, but remain unclear. ■

U.S. Engagement in the Maghreb

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs Amanda J. Dory spoke at a CSIS Maghreb Roundtable entitled "U.S. Engagement in the Maghreb" on June 12, 2014. Dory shared her view of the major strategic threats facing the United States in North Africa and the Sahel, outlined trends in U.S. diplomatic and military engagement in the region, and commented on the United States' bilateral and multilateral relationships with partners there. Among the issues Dory discussed in more detail were the fragile security situation in Libya, transnational threats emerging from the Sahel, and concerns about North African fighters participating in the conflict in Syria eventually returning home. ■

an existential battle underway against ISIS, keeping that distance will be harder. At the same time, the rise of ISIS provides opportunities for Iran to engage with countries that are otherwise disposed to isolate Iran. Much as the situation in Afghanistan post-2001 provided opportunities for Iran to cooperate with Western countries against the Taliban, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has already floated the idea of cooperating with the United States in Iraq, and the United States seems prepared to discuss it. In this scenario, Iran goes from being a problem of global concern to being part of the solution to a problem of global concern. Overall, it's a big win.

For the Kurds, Baghdad's preoccupation with the Sunni tribal areas is welcome because it adds to Kurdish leverage over the Arab areas of Iraq. Not only does a battle with ISIS draw both troops and attention from disputed Kurdish areas such as Kirkuk, but it also helps make the Kurds—and their effective militia, the peshmerga—vital to the survival of the central government in Baghdad. The Kurds seem poised to emerge with more power and more autonomy after this is all over. While they are unlikely to declare independence, their future role in Iraq will likely be on terms they see as more favorable.

For the Gulf Cooperation Council states, which were uniformly cool to Prime Minister Maliki and saw him as a sectarian thug, Maliki's problems must elicit some schadenfreude. The governments themselves seem not to directly support ISIS, but funding for the group apparently comes from individual donors within the GCC. They see weakening Maliki as a way to weaken Iran; further, bogging down Iran in a proxy war in Iraq helps curb Iran's regional ambitions.

Of all the neighbors, Turkey's role is perhaps the hardest to discern. Yet it is clear that Turkey has allowed jihadists to recruit, train, and supply rebel-held areas from Turkish territory. If Turkey had a problem with the growing power of jihadists in Syria, it had myriad ways to clip their wings. Instead, Turkey seems to have tolerated ISIS's activities, even if it didn't actually encourage them.

And then we come to Maliki. While he surely does not welcome a serious challenge, neither does he shy away from one. For Maliki, the rise of ISIS confirms his skepticism about the loyalty of the Sunni tribes to the Iraqi state and the possibility of making an accommodation with them. He has been rewarded in the past for fighting militias against long odds and winning: in 2008, he took on militias in Basra to the shock of his U.S. military advisers, in Operation Charge of the Knights. His control today of southern Iraq, which produces most of Iraq's oil, is due in large measure to his willingness to fight then. Making an accommodation now is likely the furthest thing from his mind.

As the foregoing makes clear, every state in the region would see an ISIS victory as catastrophic. Still, it is hard to find any neighbor that doesn't see some advantage to escalating violence in Iraq, as long as the violence can be contained.

With this background, it is hard to see how a U.S. approach that stresses political inclusion and power sharing can be effective in the near term. Each side still has more fight left in it. At the same time, U.S. weaponry on the side of the Iraqi government will do little to bring this conflict closer to resolution.

Any solutions in Iraq need to consider the diplomatic and military strategies of Iraq's neighbors first and foremost, and they must reflect a U.S. willingness to inflict pain—overtly and covertly—on the various antagonists. The United States has invested hundreds of billions of dollars and sacrificed thousands of lives to give Iraq a chance at democracy, but the pivotal moment in Iraq's democratic transition is not now. Instead, this is the moment when Iraq may tip the region into crisis. The moment calls for tough-minded diplomacy, with friends and enemies alike. This is a regional problem, not merely an Iraqi one. ■ 06/16/2014

Links of Interest

John P. Entelis and Robert P. Parks spoke at a CSIS Maghreb Roundtable entitled “[What's Next for Algeria?](#)” at CSIS on May 14, 2014.

Jon Alterman moderated a panel at CSIS on “[The Syrian Conflict's Foreign Fighters: Concerns at Home and Abroad](#)” on May 30, 2014.

Bloomberg quoted Jon Alterman in “[El-Sisi Looms Over Egypt Vote Billed as Key to Restore Order.](#)”

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