

Viewpoints
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Iran and the Syrian and Iraqi Crises

Jubin M. Goodarzi

Deputy Head, International Relations Department
Webster University, Geneva, Switzerland

Tehran has had a longstanding alliance with Damascus since 1979, and its relations with Baghdad have steadily improved subsequent to the ouster of Saddam Hussein. This has resulted in close ties between Iran and these two key Arab states. However, this has all been called into question with the eruption of the Syrian revolt, and the recent rise of ISIS and its challenge to the Iraqi state. This article provides an overview of the conditions in Syria and Iraq which facilitated the rise of ISIS, and explains what is at stake for Iran, particularly in the case of Iraq.

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“Iran’s relations with the neighboring country of Iraq have a strategic importance... [Iran] stands firmly with the Iraqi government and its people in the war against the terrorists of the Islamic State.”

Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iranian Foreign Minister, 24 August 2014

“We asked for weapons, and Iran was the first country to provide us with weapons and ammunition.”

Massoud Barzani, President of the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, 27 August 2014

In view of the protracted nature of the Syrian conflict since 2011, the destabilization of the Levant, the rise of ISIS, and the spillover of the fighting into Iraq should not have come as a surprise to anyone. In general terms, it could be argued that the ideologies and actions of key countries in the region, most notably Syria, Iran, Turkey, and the Gulf Arab states, coupled with shortsighted and ill-conceived policies of the major powers, have contributed to the current conundrum in the region. In order to understand why ISIS was able to gain traction and achieve success on the ground, one needs to look at the broader historical, political, and socio-economic context of developments in both Syria under Bashar al-Assad’s regime and in Iraq during the rule of the Ba’ath Party and following the U.S.-led invasion.

With regard to Syria, the Ba’ath first came to power in 1963, and the “Assad dynasty” has been at the helm since 1970. Throughout its rule, the regime has been for the most part a secular, authoritarian dictatorship that has prevented the rise of civil society and initially clamped down on Islamists. This was clearly demonstrated by the violent confrontation between the regime and the Muslim Brethren in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

In view of its socialist underpinnings, traditionally the Syrian state had been the main provider of social and economic support to the rural and urban working classes. In the two decades prior to the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011, the regime began to disengage in this respect. The emerging vacuum was filled by Islamic charities and organizations. Hence, Syria’s social and cultural fabric became more conservative and religious in the years prior to the revolt. Concomitantly, the Assad regime also eased restrictions on religious groups, aiming to accommodate and co-opt them.¹ In the run-up to, during, and after the 2003 Iraq war, the regime tried to channel the activities and energies of the Islamist groups abroad by aiding the flow of local and foreign Islamist fighters across the border into Iraq to fight U.S.-led forces. Furthermore, this entailed providing al-Qaeda with a base in Syria.²

Other factors also influenced the rise of the Islamists prior to and after the 2011 unrest; most notably, the exposure of Syrian expatriates who had worked in the Gulf Arab states since the 1970s to puritanical and extremist Islamist ideologies such as Salafism and Wahhabism, social and tribal connections between Syria and the Gulf Arabs, the indoctrination of Syrian Sunni clerics in religious institutions funded by the Gulf Arab states, and the flow of foreign Islamist

fighters into Syria after outbreak of the conflict in 2011.³ Overall, the Syrian Ba'ath's strategy backfired as Islamist groups began to assert themselves. Already, by 2008, they started to challenge the regime, and with the eruption of the unrest in 2011, they eventually took up arms against their former Ba'athist benefactors.

As far as the Syrian crisis is concerned, there were several root causes for the outbreak of the unrest in March 2011. First, the beginning of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, where the masses took to the streets in these countries demanding political change and freedom, served as a source of inspiration to the Syrian people. Second, Syrians had become frustrated and disillusioned by the absence of political reform and liberalization during the presidency of Bashar Assad. Third, the fruits of Syria's economic growth were not enjoyed by the majority of Syrians. The privatization policies of the regime led to the growth of crony capitalism and bred resentment, and the gap between the rich and poor increased.⁴ Fourth, the continuous drought from 2006 onwards had a devastating impact on Syrian agriculture and on the livelihoods of 1.5 million Syrian farmers. The sector employed almost a quarter of the country's workforce and contributed almost one-third of Syria's GDP. Many farmers left rural areas for cities looking for work, thereby contributing to the growing volatility of the situation.⁵ Fifth, for a number of years, Syria's regional and international adversaries had initiated covert efforts to undermine the Assad regime and also break the Syrian-Iranian axis. These policies were pursued in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq war. In the case of Syria, this was partially motivated by the aim to punish Damascus for fuelling the insurgency in Iraq in the years that followed.⁶ During the 2006 Lebanon war, the Bush administration found it expedient to delay the adoption of a UN Security Council ceasefire resolution for over a month, hoping that the Israeli military attack would destroy Hezbollah - one of the trump cards held by Damascus and Tehran in the regional power struggle. Other instances included the assassination of senior Syrian, Iranian, and Hezbollah commanders, mostly notably those of Syrian General Mohammad Suleiman and Lebanese operative Imad Mughniyah in 2008.⁷

By the latter half of 2011, the Assad regime's heavy-handed and brutal response to the demonstrations transformed the situation into an armed conflict. Quite rapidly, a proxy war emerged in Syria which affected the dynamics and evolution of the struggle. In essence, there were three dimensions to the confrontation: the domestic one pitting the Assad regime against the internal opposition; the regional one with Iran, Iraq, and Hezbollah aiding Damascus and Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states helping the opposition; and the international one, as Russia provided military support and diplomatic cover in the U.N. Security Council to the Syrian regime while the US and its allies gave various forms of non-lethal aid and training to the rebel forces.

However, political leaders and the news media in the West and the Middle East avoided providing a clear picture of the situation to the public in the two years that followed the beginning of the Syrian conflict. It was only by the latter part of 2013 that there was a gradual and reluctant shift in the official and mainstream narrative and presentation of the facts. This was largely due to the reluctance to acknowledge that some of the backers of the Syrian opposition and some of the groups they were supporting espoused extremist Islamist ideologies. Among these were governments, organizations, and private individuals in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates who provided financial and material

support for the extremist groups which began to flourish as the Syrian conflict dragged on, and the violence polarized, brutalized, and radicalized people and society within Syria.⁸

Essentially, the West has made a Faustian bargain with the Gulf Arabs in view of the close political, strategic, and economic ties that bind the two sides.⁹ On the political level, a hostile and anti-American Iran necessitates close Western cooperation with the Gulf Arabs. In strategic terms, the United States has major military assets deployed in the Persian Gulf region, most notably the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet in Bahrain and the Al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar. Economically, oil exports from the Gulf region are of vital importance to the international energy market and Washington's allies in Europe and East Asia. Furthermore, the Gulf states have proven to be an extremely lucrative market for U.S. arms export, clearly exemplified by the \$60 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia in 2010, the largest overseas arms sale in history, and more recently, one for \$11 billion with Qatar.¹⁰ In the final analysis, for all the reasons mentioned above, it should not have come as a surprise that a group such as ISIS succeeded in growing and prospering in the violent and convoluted environment that developed in Syria since 2011.

While the origins of the group can be traced back to at least 2004 in Iraq, the ground there was made fertile for the growth of extremism due to a number of reasons during the Ba'athist and post-Ba'athist periods. There were several important legacies from the pre-2003 period. First, 35 years of dictatorship under the Iraqi Ba'ath ensured the atomization of Iraqi society and the total absence of civil society. Second, three devastating wars (1980-88, 1991, and 2003) inflicted inestimable damage on the country. Third, 13 years of crippling UN sanctions between 1990 and 2003 impoverished the population and tore apart the fabric of Iraqi society. The erosion of the power and credibility of the Iraqi state meant that people increasingly fell back on tribal and sectarian loyalties.

Subsequent to the US-led invasion of Iraq, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the successor Iraqi governments made a number of key mistakes that ensured the deterioration of the situation in the post-Saddam period. First, the decision by CPA to dismantle the Iraqi armed forces and dismiss all Ba'ath Party officials holding government posts alienated many Iraqis and contributed to the rise of the insurgency in the months that followed.¹¹ Second, the Bush administration failed to deploy sufficient numbers of U.S.-led coalition troops to provide security. These troops numbered only about 175,000 soldiers. Peacekeeping traditionally requires 20 security people to be deployed per every 1,000 inhabitants, and in the case of Iraq, this would have meant in excess of 400,000 thousand troops.¹² Third, by the time Saddam Hussein was overthrown in 2003, Iraq had become an economic wasteland and desperately needed some sound state-led initiatives and policies to re-build the economy. However, the CPA's adherence to free-market economics and privatization exacerbated the dire conditions. Fourth, subsequent to the handover of power to the Iraqis, the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki became increasingly authoritarian and blemished by mismanagement and corruption. Fifth, the intensification of the insurgency during 2006-2007 orchestrated primarily by Sunni Arabs against US-led forces and the Iraqi government reinforced growing discrimination by the al-Maliki government against the Sunni Arab population.

Much criticism has been leveled at al-Maliki attributing the current crisis to his policies and accusing him of being an Iranian stooge. However, he inherited a very poor hand from his

predecessors. He had been chosen since he was from the only major Shi'a Iraqi party that did not have a militia, and he was considered weak and malleable. When he assumed office, the insurgency in Iraq was reaching new heights and there were incessant rumors that he may become the victim of a coup. However, he defied all expectations by gradually consolidating his power by appointing loyalists to key political and military posts and by steering an independent path. His policies displeased Tehran, and by the time of the 2010 parliamentary elections, Iran actually opted to support the Iraqi National Alliance – composed of the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI) and the Sadrists – instead of al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition. It was only due to the ensuing political stalemate after the elections that Tehran somewhat reluctantly helped cobble together a coalition of all the major Iraqi Shi'a parties to ensure al-Maliki would remain in office.¹³

The US-led surge in 2007-2008 and the Sunni Awakening dented the appeal of Islamist extremist groups such as ISIS, leading to the decline of the insurgency and the stabilization of the situation in Iraq by 2009. With the eruption of the unrest in Syria two years later, ISIS focused its efforts across the border, where it and other Islamist groups such as the Nusra Front were able to grow and thrive. By the winter of 2013-14, ISIS was able to carry its campaign back into Iraq and capture large swathes of territory. By June, it was able to capture the city of Mosul, thereby setting off alarms in Iraq and beyond its borders.

As an extremist Sunni movement that does not recognize Shi'as to be Muslim, the rise of ISIS has been an extremely ominous development for Iran. Moreover, ISIS has been able to take its campaign into Iraq (a country having a 1,500 kilometer common border with Iran) and to threaten the existence of the government in Baghdad – both of which are deeply disconcerting from Tehran's perspective. Already there have been clashes along the Iran-Iraq frontier between ISIS and Iranian security forces since June 2014.

Iran's response since then has been swift and entailed taking a number of decisive steps. First, it dispatched elements of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force to Iraq in order to defend Baghdad, Samarra, and Karbala. ¹⁴ Later, in August, according to reports, troops from the 81st Armored Division crossed the border to assist Iraqi Kurdish *peshmerga* units in fighting ISIS. Second, it sent Su-25 ground-attack planes and other aircraft to assist in the aerial bombardment of ISIS forces. Third, specialist technical units and drones were sent to engage in surveillance of ISIS communications and movements.¹⁵ Fourth, Iran immediately began to provide arms and ammunition to Iraqi forces fighting ISIS. Fifth, Iranian personnel also gave advice on military tactics and strategy to the Iraqi army, Shi'a militias and Kurdish *peshmerga* units. Their role seems to have been instrumental in lifting the siege of Amerli in September and Jurf al-Sakhar in October.¹⁶ Senior Iranian military officials have explicitly stated that Tehran would not tolerate an ISIS presence along its frontier.

Tehran is determined to prevent an ISIS victory in Iraq since this would have major security implications for Iran. Such a development would pose a direct threat to Iran's national security, endangering its western flank. It would also enable ISIS to encourage unrest in the Sunni-inhabited regions of Iran, leading to the destabilization of the Iranian state. The Islamic Republic is also concerned that recent developments may lead to the disintegration of Iraq, with Iraqi Kurdistan declaring independence. This could have negative political and strategic consequences for Iran in terms of a knock-on effect on Iranian Kurdistan. The Iranian Kurds

could then opt to go their own way or join the newly-independent Kurdish state to the west. Tehran would also be concerned about a more prominent American and Israeli presence in Iraqi Kurdistan as both have established a foothold there since 2003. The disintegration of Iraq could lead to the destabilization of Iran in terms of a spillover of the hostilities across the border or providing impetus to Iranian minorities along the periphery to take up arms against the government.

Overall, Iraq is of vital importance to Iran in several respects. First, having Iraq as an ally ensures Iran's security to the west and enables Tehran to project its influence across the Arab East into Syria and Lebanon. Second, bilateral trade has been growing between Iran and Iraq in recent years, and its value stood at \$12 billion in 2013.¹⁷ Finally, it is important to bear in mind that if the Assad regime in Syria falls, the value of Iraq will increase significantly for Iran.

With regard to recent events, the Obama Administration seems to be pursuing a contradictory policy. On one hand, the Obama Administration is assisting the Iraqi Kurds and the newly-formed government of Haider al-Abadi to fend off and roll back the advances of ISIS, and at the same time, it is committing itself to helping the moderate opposition in the Syrian conflict and striking ISIS strongholds. There is no military solution to the conflict in both countries, especially in Syria. In Iraq, al-Abadi's administration must take substantive steps to include the Sunni Arab population. Otherwise any military gains on the ground against ISIS will prove to be short-lived. In Syria, funneling more arms, resources, and money to the Syrian opposition will only aggravate the situation. It may lead to further empowerment of radicals, the emergence of new extremist groups, and the spillover of the war into other neighboring states, such as Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Israel. The only sound solution is some form of political settlement through negotiations. This may entail the threat or the use of military force by the US and its allies to bring the warring parties to the negotiating table and compromise on key issues. All the key stakeholders and actors in these two conflicts, including Iran, need to be part of the political process.

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The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.

Endnotes

¹ See Line Khatib, "Syria's Civil Society as a Tool for Regime Legitimacy," in *Civil Society in Syria and Iran: Activism in Authoritarian Contexts*, eds. Paul Aarts and Francesco Cavatorta (Boulder Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013), pp. 19-38.

² See Hans Krech, "Al Qaeda in the Levant and the Civil War in Syria," *Orient: The German Journal for Politics, Economics and Culture for the Middle East*, Volume 53, No. 3, 2012, pp. 45-50.

³ Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2013), pp. 94-95.

⁴ For excellent analyses in this regard, see Caroline Donati, "The Economics of Authoritarian Upgrading in Syria: the Liberalization and the Reconfiguration of Economic Networks," in *Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran*, eds. Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp. 35-60, and Bassam Haddad, "Business Associations and the New Nexus of Power in Syria," in *Civil Society in Syria and Iran: Activism in Authoritarian Contexts*, eds. Paul Aarts and Francesco Cavatorta (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013), pp. 69-92.

⁵ See Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2013), pp. 19, 26 and 28-29.

⁶ At the height of the insurgency in 2006-2007, it is estimated that 75-80% of all foreign suicide bombers in Iraq entered the country through Syria. See Daniel Dombey, "Influx of Suicide Bombers Entering Iraq from Syria," *The Financial Times*, 31 January 2007.

⁷ See Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2013), p. 109. With regard to Iran, the Bush administration started to funnel arms to Iranian Kurdish separatists as early as the summer of 2003, and aided insurgencies along the periphery of the Iranian state, most notably in Iranian Baluchistan. Confidential conversation with a senior UN official who had visited the Iran-Iraq border region during the summer of 2003, July 2003, Geneva, Switzerland, and Thomas R. Mattair, *Iran - Global Security Watch* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 2008), p. 101.

⁸ See Owen Jones, "Fight Terror by Avoiding Dictators," *The Guardian Weekly*, 5 September 2014. There was also an unstated understanding and consensus in Western capitals, including Washington, that as long as the Syrian conflict continued, without spilling over into neighboring countries and destabilizing the region, there was no great cause for concern. The war was weakening the Assad regime and draining Iran as Tehran poured in resources and aid to prop up its Syrian ally.

⁹ For an illuminating analysis, see Toby C. Jones, "Embracing Crisis in the Gulf," *Middle East Report*, Number 264, Fall 2012, pp. 26-30.

¹⁰ See Tom Shanker and David E. Sanger, "Obama is Said to be Preparing to Seek Approval on Saudi Arms Sale," *The New York Times*, 17 September 2014, and Peter Cooney, "U.S. Signs Agreement for \$11 Billion Arms Sale to Qatar," *Reuters*, 14 July 2014.

¹¹ See Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2012), pp. 37-39, and David L. Phillips, *Losing Iraq: Inside the Postwar Reconstruction Fiasco* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), pp. 135, 145-146.

¹² James Dobbins, Seth G. Jones, Benjamin Runkle and Siddharth Mohandas, *Occupying Iraq: A History of the Coalition Provisional Authority* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2009), p. 111.

¹³ See Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2012), pp. 127, 157, 187-188.

¹⁴ See Farnaz Fassihi, "Iran Deploys Forces to Fight Al-Qaeda Inspired Militants in Iraq," *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 June 2014, and Martin Chulov, "Iran Sends Troops to Aid Fight Against ISIS Militants," *The Guardian*, 14 June 2014.

¹⁵ See Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "Iran Secretly Sending Drones and Supplies into Iraq, U.S. Officials Say," *The International New York Times*, 25 June 2014, and "Iran Sends 3 Attack Planes to Iraqi Government," *The International New York Times*, 8 July 2014.

¹⁶ See Saeed Kamal Dehghan, "Qassem Suleimani Photo Makeover Reveals Iran's New Publicity Strategy," *The Guardian*, 14 October 2014 and Loveday Morris, "Iraq's Victory Over Militants in Sunni Town Underlines Challenges Government Faces," *The Washington Post*, 29 October 2014.

¹⁷ See "Iraq Looks to Expand Trade with Iran," *The Tehran Times*, 23 December 2013.

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