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Article 1.

Washington Post

Obama's tough choices in Iraq

David Ignatius

June 19 -- President Obama came nearly full circle on Iraq on Thursday, sending military advisers back to cope with that country's disintegration as U.S. officials lobbied for replacement of the prime minister that the United States helped install. These were the right choices, but they were a measure of how badly U.S. policy has gone awry.

Obama has concluded that Iraq faces all-out civil war and partition unless it replaces Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki with a less sectarian and polarizing leader. U.S. diplomats are floating the names of alternative candidates in Baghdad. Meanwhile,

Obama is sending up to 300 military advisers to assess if the Iraqi army can be salvaged after it collapsed in Anbar province, Mosul and Tikrit.

The people who will pull the plug on Maliki are Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani and other Iraqi kingmakers. The United States is pushing them to signal unmistakably that Maliki is finished. Obama knows this silent putsch will succeed only if it has tacit support from Iran, which effectively has a veto on the next Iraqi prime minister.

One sign of Iran's hegemony is that Gen. Qassem Suleimani, the head of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, was said to have flown this week to the northwestern city of Tal Afar, near the border with Syria, to assess the battle there against Sunni extremists.

To create a broad-based Iraqi government that can fight the brutal insurgency led by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the United States and its allies need to quickly gain the support of Iraq's Sunni tribal leaders. I met with several of them in Amman two months ago, and it was clear that, although frightened of ISIS's power, they were using it to attack Maliki. This Sunni opportunism can be reversed. The tribal leaders told me they want U.S. help, and they should get it.

Saudi Arabia and Jordan, which have leverage with the Sunni tribes, began talking this week with tribal leaders to pull them away from ISIS. That's a plus, but traditional bribes won't be enough here. The Sunnis want a real share of power.

Senior U.S. officials have been debating how to begin targeting ISIS. U.S. drones are gathering intelligence over ISIS-controlled

areas, in hopes of fixing the locations of key leaders. The U.S. advisers who will be moving with Iraqi units on the ground will also gather crucial intelligence. One place to target ISIS initially might be in its havens and infiltration routes along the Syria-Iraq border, where there's less chance of hitting Sunni tribesmen.

"We know where their base camps and training camps are, which is where we can start," says U.S. Central Command adviser Derek Harvey.

The campaign to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria will need political cover, so that it doesn't alienate Sunni allies such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan. One possibility, suggested by a source close to the Jordanian government, would be the Gulf Cooperation Council. This alliance of Gulf monarchies has sometimes been toothless in the past, but recently it has worked effectively to keep Yemen from splintering, and it can play a key role now, working in tandem with King Abdullah of Jordan.

The Saudis are going to have to swallow the reality that ISIS can't be stopped without some cooperation with Iran. One bridge might be a GCC summit with the Iranians to discuss the crisis in Syria and Iraq. The GCC could even propose a stabilization force to be deployed in Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria. It's a long shot, but the Saudis long ago backed a similar "Arab Deterrent Force" that stabilized Lebanon after the worst years of its civil war in 1975 and '76.

Good policy for Iraq and Syria can't rely on military force alone. The United States' misadventures after the 2003 invasion of Iraq surely teach that lesson. What will stabilize this part of the world (slowly, slowly) is political action backed by military power —

conducted under a series of umbrellas: The first umbrella is a new Iraqi unity government; the second is a U.S.-Iranian dialogue that draws in Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners; the third is an international coalition backed by the United Nations.

One irony of the current Iraqi mess is that the only stable area is Kurdistan, whose leader, Barzani, is probably the strongest political figure in the country. If Iran balks at removing Maliki in Baghdad, the United States should respond by deepening its ties with the Kurds — a step on the way to an independent Kurdistan and a new map for the Middle East.

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President Obama came nearly full circle on Iraq on Thursday, sending military advisers back to cope with that country's disintegration as U.S. officials lobbied for replacement of the prime minister that the United States helped install. These were the right choices, but they were a measure of how badly U.S. policy has gone awry.

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Article 2.

The Washington Institute

SIS, Iraq, and the War in Syria: Military Outlook

Jeffrey White

June 19, 2014 -- Events on the battlefield will reveal the true effects of the crisis, but the ISIS campaign in Iraq could ultimately help the Syrian opposition and hurt the Assad regime.

The stunning advance of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in northern and western Iraq over the past week has significant military implications for the war in Syria. The jihadist group's forces and operations in Syria have already been affected positively and negatively by its commitments in Iraq. Going forward, Syrian rebel factions may take advantage of the ISIS campaign in Iraq to move against the group's positions in Syria, especially in Raqqa province. They may also be able to capitalize on the withdrawal of Iraqi Shiite militants who had previously been fighting on behalf of the Assad regime. For the

regime, the situation will require more effort by its native forces and perhaps by its Hezbollah ally, which may need to pick up the slack caused by the departure of Iraqi elements. Bashar al-Assad's forces may have increased military operations against ISIS since the latest crisis emerged, putting further pressure on the regime's limited and stretched military assets.

If, as seems likely, the fighting in Iraq continues at serious levels for some time, these effects will become more pronounced in Syria. But developments on the battlefield in both countries will provide the clearest indicators of who is benefitting from the situation and who is not.

Scope And Meaning Of The Isis Advance

Earlier this month, ISIS forces began a rapid advance in northern Iraq, routing government forces and taking the important city of Mosul by a coup de main. Facing almost no resistance and supported by disaffected Iraqi Sunnis, ISIS continued its drive south, overrunning Iraqi military facilities, taking additional towns, threatening Samarra and Baquba, and arriving within thirty-seven miles of Baghdad itself. Stiffening government resistance slowed the advance, as did the mobilization of Shiite militia forces and volunteers, Iraqis returning from Syria, and, reportedly, Iranian forces. Meanwhile, Kurdish forces have secured the northern city of Kirkuk and prevented ISIS penetration into the Kurdistan Regional Government.

With a force estimated to number a few thousand, ISIS was able to bring Iraq to the brink of collapse, defeat major army

formations, capture large amounts of military equipment, loot hundreds of millions of dollars from Iraqi banks, and begin establishing itself as the governing authority across a large tract of Sunni territory. The group did not do this alone, cooperating with Sunni tribal forces and former Baathists of the Saddam Hussein regime. While the ISIS advance has slowed, it has not come to a halt -- rather, it has created a new reality in Iraq, and its implications for various actors in Syria are becoming apparent.

Effects on Isis in Syria

The ISIS campaign in Iraq will likely prove to be a mixed blessing for the organization in Syria. To be sure, the positive effects for its forces may be manifold. In the near term, ISIS as a whole will be politically and psychologically strengthened. It will be seen as successful in battle, capable of major organizational and logistical accomplishments, and clever and supple in its operations. The group's image as an irresistible force will be enhanced, and those living in ISIS-controlled areas will see little prospect of relief from its rule.

ISIS will also benefit from the very large amounts of cash looted from Iraqi banks, reportedly as much as $495 million. This sum will enhance the group's ability to build its forces, arm them, and provide governance, goods, and services within its area of control.

Perhaps most important, ISIS military capabilities could be significantly boosted by the capture of large numbers of Iraqi army vehicles, weapons, and ammunition, as well as by the addition of new recruits. At minimum, these gains will allow the

group to arm and equip more fighters, enhance its mobility, and increase its firepower. This assumes that ISIS is capable of recovering, integrating, and maintaining the captured equipment. New videos have shown the movement of such equipment into Syria, and ISIS units in Iraq are already employing captured Humvees and trucks; they could potentially employ captured tanks and artillery as well. The effects of these developments may soon be felt in Syria.

Yet the Iraq campaign will likely have negative effects for ISIS forces in Syria as well. First is the potential diversion of forces. It is not clear what percentage of ISIS forces are fighting in Iraq, but it is believed to be half or more of the group's roughly 10,000 members. ISIS may be compelled to commit even more forces to Iraq, weakening its military position in Syria. Second, the large amount of Iraqi territory over which the group has gained at least nominal control might also require additional forces from Syria, both to resist government countermeasures and help control the areas. Third, the Assad regime has reportedly increased its military operations against ISIS, apparently in response to the group's movement of captured military equipment into Syria, and perhaps in coordination with the Iraqi government. On June 15-16, regime air forces struck ISIS-associated targets in Raqqa and Hasaka provinces. If such strikes become a regular occurrence, they will put additional pressure on ISIS and perhaps weaken its ability to fight in Syria.

Effects on Syrian Rebels and the Assad Regime

ISIS now faces a potential three-front war: against various Syrian rebel factions, against Iraqi government forces, and perhaps against the Assad regime, which had largely refrained

from directly confronting the group until recently. This situation will likely prevent ISIS from concentrating its resources against its Syrian opponents and should give these enemies opportunities to move against it. The group's ability to defend its territory in Raqqa and Aleppo provinces appears to have weakened recently, and rebels have been able to take some advantage of this. At the same time, the ISIS offensive in Deir al-Zour province has at least slowed, relieving some of the pressure on its Islamist opponents in the area.

The return of Iraqi fighters from Syria to Iraq should also benefit the rebels. Iraqi Shiite militants have been heavily involved in the fighting around Damascus and Aleppo, and their departure has weakened the effective coalition of forces the regime has used to score victories. These effects would be compounded if Hezbollah or Iranian forces serving in Syria were sent to Iraq. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has indicated that his organization will assist in Iraq if asked, though the group seems more likely to increase its commitment in Syria instead.

Whatever the case, the departure of some allied forces will increase the burden on the regime's regular and irregular native forces, which are already stretched thin and suffering substantial casualties. Hezbollah is already said to be making up some of the deficit, but its existing forces in Syria continue to take casualties, and its commitment to Assad remains a political problem at home in Lebanon. Moreover, if the reported airstrikes against ISIS in eastern Syria become a persistent mission, the regime's limited air assets will be diverted from attacking the opposition in more strategically important parts of the country, giving some relief to rebel forces and civilians.

Outlook

The escalated fighting in Iraq will likely continue for some time. Now that the initial ISIS advance has slowed, neither the group nor the Iraqi government has the capacity to quickly or radically change the situation on the battlefield. The fighting is likely to be protracted and indecisive, with similar effects on the situation in Syria.

Over time, an ongoing battle of attrition in Iraq may work to the advantage of rebel forces in Syria. While ISIS is well organized and formidable in some respects, maintaining a two- or three-front war will require it to allocate resources against multiple threats, replace combat losses, integrate captured equipment, consolidate its hold on newly gained areas, and stave off Iraqi counteroffensives and opportunistic advances by its enemies in Syria. For an organization of its size, this adds up to a serious challenge.

In Syria, it is unclear to what extent the rebels can take advantage of the situation. Opportunities could arise to make gains against ISIS and the regime, but the rebels' ability to exploit them is uncertain. Their weaknesses in command likely mean that any such response would be ad hoc and depend on existing or newly formed coalitions of rebel units. This would reduce the prospect for major success against their enemies.

For the Assad regime, the Iraq situation is yet another major challenge. Damascus will need to find a way to compensate for the loss of allied Iraqi militants and perhaps intensify the fight against ISIS in areas where regime forces are weak. Furthermore, any success it has against ISIS would actually help the Syrian opposition.

Again, events on the battlefield will clarify the true effects of the crisis. If ISIS becomes involved in a protracted war of attrition in Iraq, its position in Syria could weaken visibly. Rebel successes or failures against the Assad regime will indicate whether or not they have been able to take advantage of the situation. Likewise, further regime victories against the rebels and an increase in Hezbollah forces would indicate that Assad is overcoming the negative effects of the crisis. There will be plenty of conflicting claims about all of this, but the facts on the ground should become clear.

Finally, while the ISIS advance in Iraq has increased the complexity of the Syrian war, it also presents another opportunity for the United States and its allies to make gains against Assad. Military assistance to moderate Syrian rebel groups would help them take advantage of the situation, allowing them to act more effectively against ISIS, the enemy of all, and the regime, the enemy of most. Given that ISIS-seized American military equipment could soon affect the group's capabilities in Syria, the rebels may need concrete U.S. assistance now more than ever.

Jeffrey White is a defense fellow with The Washington Institute and a former senior defense intelligence officer.

Article 3.

The Washington Post

An enclave strategy for Iraq

Fareed Zakaria

June 19 -- Can Iraq hold together? It's worth examining what is happening in that country through a broader prism. If you had looked at the Middle East 15 years ago, you would have seen a string of strikingly similar regimes — from Libya and Tunisia in the west to Syria and Iraq in the east. They were all dictatorships. They were all secular, in the sense that they did not derive their legitimacy from religious identity. Historically, they had all been supported by outside powers — first the British and French, then the superpowers — which meant that these rulers worried more about pleasing patrons abroad than currying favor at home. And they had secure borders.

Today, across the region, from Libya to Syria, that structure of authority has collapsed and people are reaching for their older identities — Sunni, Shiite, Kurd. Sectarian groups, often Islamist, have filled the power vacuum, spilling over borders and spreading violence. In Iraq and elsewhere, no amount of U.S. military power can put Humpty Dumpty back together.

There are exceptions. Algeria remains an old-fashioned secular dictatorship. Egypt, perhaps the longest-functioning state in the world, has reasserted the old order by using force. The Gulf monarchies — Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates — have withstood the turmoil partly because of greater legitimacy and mostly because of massive patronage systems. And most hopefully, Morocco, Jordan and Tunisia have reformed enough to keep revolutionaries at bay.

The old order was probably unsustainable. It rested on extreme suppression, which was producing extreme opposition movements, and on superpower patronage, which couldn't last. The countries with significant sectarian divides and in which minority groups ruled — Iraq and Syria — became the most vulnerable.

Let's be clear. The Iraq war was the crucial trigger, and the U.S. occupation needlessly exacerbated sectarian identities rather than building national ones. But once the old order broke, Iraq's Shiites, who had been suppressed for decades, in some cases brutally, were not likely to sign up to share power easily with their former tormentors.

During and immediately after the surge — 2007-08 — Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki behaved differently. But if it took the danger of civil war, the presence of about 200,000 foreign troops, a particularly skilled American general (David Petraeus) and billions of dollars to force him to make nice for a brief while, it was unlikely to be a long-term arrangement.

It is doubtful that a Shiite government in Baghdad — using an increasingly Shiite army to defend itself — will ever fully regain the allegiance of the Sunnis. The Sunnis have done enough killing to keep the Shiites wary for decades. Washington has urged the Baghdad government to be inclusive. It has hinted that the best outcome would be a new Iraqi government with a broad coalition. That's true, but it's also unlikely. Washington needs a Plan B.

Plan B should be an enclave strategy. The United States should recognize that Iraq is turning into a country of enclaves and

work to ensure that these regions stay as stable, terrorism-free and open as possible. The Kurdish enclave, bolstered by having captured the vital city of Kirkuk, is already a success story. The Shiite region of the south can be stable. It will be possible to work with countries such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan to influence the Sunni groups in the middle of the country, purging terrorists and empowering moderate Sunnis.

A comparable strategy in Syria would allow groups such as the Kurds and Sunnis to protect their own areas from Bashar al-Assad's brutality but recognize that they will not be able to topple the regime. There will be places where the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and similar groups gain strength. In those areas, Washington would have to use drones, counterintelligence and occasional Special Operations forces strikes — just as it does in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. The world of enclaves already exists. Washington simply has to realize that parts of Iraq are now in it.

The polyglot Middle East has been dying for a while, but it is now on its last legs. Countries rich in minorities, such as Iraq, have seen their Christian populations flee or be massacred. Where minorities remain, communities are segregating themselves.

The United States can't stop a tidal trend. What it can do is try to limit the fallout, bolster stable countries and zones, support those who believe in reconciliation, and protect itself and its friends.

Article 4.

WSJ

America Shouldn't Choose Sides in Iraq's Civil War

Rand Paul

June 19, 2014 -- Though many claim the mantle of Ronald Reagan on foreign policy, too few look at how he really conducted it. The Iraq war is one of the best examples of where we went wrong because we ignored that.

In 1984, Reagan's Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger developed the following criteria for war, primarily to avoid another Vietnam. His speech, "The Uses of Military Power," boils down to this: The United States should not commit forces to combat unless the vital national interests of the U.S. or its allies are involved and only "with the clear intention of winning." U.S. combat troops should be committed only with "clearly defined political and military objectives" and with the capacity to accomplish those objectives and with a "reasonable assurance" of the support of U.S. public opinion and Congress and only "as a last resort."

Much of the rationale for going to war in 2003 did not measure up to the Weinberger Doctrine, and I opposed the Iraq war. I thought we needed to be more prudent about the weightiest decision a country can make. Like Reagan, I thought we should never be eager to go to war. And now, 11 years later, we are still dealing with the consequences.

Today the Middle East is less stable than in 2003. The Iraq war strengthened Iran's influence in Iraq and throughout the Middle East. Sunni extremists backed by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar have filled the vacuum. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has taken over the cities of Mosul, Tikrit and is on the march to Baghdad.

While President Obama said Thursday he will not send "combat troops," he said he is sending 300 military advisers and he has 275 servicemen to guard the U.S. Embassy. Few are advocating for boots on the ground but many are calling for airstrikes.

Let me address both of these. First, we should not put any U.S. troops on the ground in Iraq, unless it is to secure or evacuate U.S. personnel and diplomatic facilities. And while we may not completely rule out airstrikes, there are many questions that need to be addressed first.

What would airstrikes accomplish? We know that Iran is aiding the Iraqi government against ISIS. Do we want to, in effect, become Iran's air force? What's in this for Iran? Why should we choose a side, and if we do, who are we really helping?

This administration, through bad decision-making that I specifically warned against, has already indirectly aided al Qaeda and ISIS in Syria—the very group some now propose to counter with U.S. troops.

For the small group calling for boots on the ground—how can we ask our brave men and women to risk their lives for a country the Iraqis aren't willing to fight for themselves? Iraqi soldiers are stripping off their uniforms and fleeing this fight. We shouldn't ask our soldiers to put their uniforms on to take

their places.

No matter what the administration is planning, I also insist that it go through Congress. President Obama declared this war over and even asked Congress to rescind its 2002 Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq, something I agreed with. If he or others want a new war or military action, they need a new approval, from Congress, or I will oppose them.

The U.S. spent eight years training the Iraqis and nearly a decade of war has brought us to this point. Those who say it was a mistake to leave are forgetting that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government was demanding we leave in 2011.

Those who say we must re-engage in Iraq are also forgetting an important part of the Weinberger Doctrine: "U.S. troops should not be committed to battle without a 'reasonable assurance' of the support of U.S. public opinion and Congress." To attempt to transform Iraq into something more amenable to our interests would likely require another decade of U.S. presence and perhaps another 4,000 American lives—a generational commitment that few Americans would be willing to make.

Many of those clamoring for military action now are the same people who made every false assumption imaginable about the cost, challenge and purpose of the Iraq war. They have been so wrong for so long. Why should we listen to them again?

Saying the mess in Iraq is President Obama's fault ignores what President Bush did wrong. Saying it is President Bush's fault is to ignore all the horrible foreign policy decisions in Syria, Libya, Egypt and elsewhere under President Obama, many of which may have contributed to the current crisis in Iraq. For

former Bush officials to blame President Obama or for Democrats to blame President Bush only serves as a reminder that both sides continue to get foreign policy wrong. We need a new approach, one that emulates Reagan's policies, puts America first, seeks peace, faces war reluctantly, and when necessary acts fully and decisively.

Too many in Washington are prevented by their own pride from admitting their mistakes. They are more concerned about saving face or pursuing a rigid ideology than they are with constructing a realist foreign policy.

David Frum, a former speechwriter for George W. Bush and a strong advocate for the Iraq war, said recently that "the United States overestimated the threat from Saddam Hussein in 2003. Without an active nuclear-weapons program, he was not a danger beyond his immediate vicinity. That war cost this country dearly. The United States failed in its most ambitious objective: establishing a stable, Western-oriented government for all of Iraq." He added that "the government in Baghdad is not an American friend, and action against ISIS will not advance U.S. interests."

Other advocates for the Iraq war need to examine the evidence and make rational decisions based on it. That's something lacking throughout Washington. Leadership means admitting our mistakes so we can correct them. We will do ourselves no favors if we simply recommit to the same mistakes and heed the advice of those who made them in the first place.

Mr. Paul is a Republican senator from Kentucky.

Article 5.

Asia Times

The impact of ISIS spread

Daniele Grassi

Speaking Freely is an Asia Times Online feature that allows guest writers to have their say. Please click here if you are interested in contributing. It is quite astonishing how rapidly the fragile state-building process in Iraq has imploded, leaving rubble on which the militants of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) advance almost in disbelief. The intervention of the United States and its allies in Iraq has destabilized the political and social framework of the country. The government of Nuri al-Maliki has completed the work, emphasizing sectarian divisions, through a progressive and a more and more apparent marginalization of the Sunni component.

The surrender of Iraqi troops is the result of this foolish and short-sighted policy. Huge investment (about US$25 billion) in their training by the international community were not enough to set up armed forces able to fulfill their basic tasks. The breakup of Iraq exacerbates security tensions in the Middle East. ISIS can count on about 10,000 actual fighters but its reservoir of sympathizers and supporters is much broader. Events in Syria should have had been a wake-up call for Iraqi and international policy makers. The rapid conquest of Raqqa and other territories in northern Syria had already highlighted the great military capabilities of the group and its high degree of organization. In a

few months, ISIS emerged as the main opposition to the government of Bashar al-Assad, at least potentially. Indeed, the latter has so far been careful from opening a direct confrontation with the terrorist group, preferring to play the card of the jihadist bogeyman to hinder the flow of money and weapons from countries that want to see Assad fall (including the United States). However, this was not enough to break the inertia and the White House's strategic confusion, and the US has again taken by surprise by events. The threat posed by al-Qaeda or, at least, from its historic core is now marginal. In recent years, the organization led by Ayman al-Zawahiri had shown its growing inability to exercise any kind of appreciable control over number of active terrorist groups operating in the Middle East and North Africa. The insubordination of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the charismatic leader of ISIS, inflicted a serious blow to al-Qaeda, revealing to the world how this group now represents little more than a brand. The success of ISIS could now permanently alter the balance of power in the jihadist galaxy, providing the al-Baghdadi group with new resources to rely on to realize his plans, namely the consolidation of a caliphate that stretch almost to the border with Iran. Along with Saudi Arabia, Iran is precisely one of the main protagonists of the events of recent years. By exacerbating the confrontation between Sunnis and Shiites, Tehran (the main sponsor of the Maliki government) and Riyadh have destabilized the entire region, with consequences that only now begin to show their real severity. The struggle for leadership in the region is underway in other theaters: Lebanon, Bahrain and Yemen, just to mention some of them. Countries that experience deep divisions and have so far been unable to express a political class capable of addressing national interests. In the short term, events in Iraq seem likely to

push the US to seek an agreement with Iran over its nuclear program with even more urgency and, ultimately, a compromise on the Syrian issue. Stopping the advance of jihadists in the region represents now a top priority, but this task can hardly be accomplished without the cooperation of Assad. "Moderate" rebel groups appear too weak and divided among themselves to be entrusted with such a delicate mission. Even if Washington intensifies its support for the Syrian Liberation Army over the coming months, such a policy would possibly aim at reducing the bargaining power of the Syrian government and its allies than to effectively reconfigure the balance of power in the country.

The disintegration of Iraq and the advances of ISIS are also fueling a lot of anxiety in Afghanistan. The US administration recently announced that the complete withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan will be finalized by 2016. Two years does not represent a sufficient time span for the country to complete a process of effective consolidation of national institutions, managing to limit the influence of many internal and regional stakeholders that oppose these dynamics. On the contrary, these stakeholders could draw an important lesson from the events going on in Iraq, reinforcing their belief that pursuing their own partisan interests represent the best option on the table. The US disengagement from the region constitutes, for example, a strong disincentive for Pakistan to end its policy of supporting terrorist groups active in the country, though these are still regarded as an essential tool of influence and a real foreign policy asset. This suggests that, in the coming years, Afghanistan could slip back into a state of absolute chaos, becoming a harbinger of new conflicts and further threat to international security.

In the future, historians will probably see in the advance of

Baghdadi and his men another sign of the declining power of the United States, a country more and more eager to focus on domestic priorities, encouraged by the impending energy independence. A withdrawal that leaves behind a toxic aftermath, divided countries and almost a dream come true: an Islamic caliphate in the heart of the Middle East.

Daniele Grassi is a writer based in Rome.

Article 6.

The Christian Science Monitor

Why America should let Iraq resolve its own crisis

Graham E. Fuller

June 19, 2014 -- The astonishing ability of the militia forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to take over several Iraqi cities reveals more about the dismaying weakness and divisions within Iraq than it does about the military prowess of ISIS. Yet this is not some jihadi apocalypse. ISIS as a strategic military force in Iraq is not to be feared. What is to be feared is the ideological defection of large numbers of Sunnis who will no longer fight for the state they see as no longer theirs.

The reasons for Sunni alienation are well known. They were the supreme losers after the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, overthrew Saddam Hussein, destroyed the ruling Baath party – the bulwark of Sunni control – and dismantled the Iraqi military. The oppressed Shiite majority took over the state, determined never again to be relegated to political weakness. Sunni Iraqis spearheaded armed resistance against the decade-long US occupation – along with some Shiite forces. In a country driven by fierce nationalist sentiments, even secular former Baathists made common cause with Sunni Islamists and jihadis to expel the US occupiers. We are now reaping the whirlwind of destruction.

The Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki could have built a new national consensus based around a broader "Iraqi nationalism," but the newly ascendant Shiites always feared the Sunnis would try to reverse the political equation and seize supreme power again. Saudi Arabia's open contempt for new Shiite power in Baghdad reinforced Shiite fears, particularly when Riyadh went all out to back even the most radical Sunni forces to overthrow the (nominally Shiite) Assad regime in neighboring Syria.

In his own paranoia and penchant for Iraqi-style strongman rule, Mr. Maliki further alienated Sunnis by excluding them from positions of power in Baghdad. The new Iraqi army became essentially an instrument of Shiite power operating with a heavy hand in Sunni areas. Today the presence of Sunni jihadis enables Maliki to link all Sunni political activism with "terrorism."

Most Iraqi Sunnis have little sympathy for the extremist

ideology and tactics of the ISIS and its jihadi predecessors. But they also see it as a key instrument for restoration of Sunni power – if not to rule the country, at least to maintain a powerful traditional voice in governance. If the stunning rise of ISIS upsets Maliki and his government, all the better, say the Sunnis: Perhaps Maliki will see reason and embrace a more inclusive government. In the meantime, ISIS operations establish the groundwork for greater Sunni regional sovereignty in what is emerging as a likely three-way federalist structure of Sunni Arab, Shiite Arab, and Kurdish regions – the only way Iraq can survive intact for the foreseeable future.

There is no way Washington should attempt to re-enter this Iraqi agony again. The US already destroyed the political, economic, and social infrastructure of Iraq, turning it into an anarchic free-for-all of every clan for itself. We in the West try to deny the ugly consequences of our own actions by shrugging our shoulders and noting that Iraqis are, after all, "eternally tribal."

But who do you turn to when the proverbial excrement – the destruction of your country – hits the fan? Most people revert to their core social identities – their clans, tribes, sectarian or regional groups – the only ones that can provide security against anarchy and enemies. There is no longer any state to provide protection. And you do not dare turn your security over to an untested, untrusted new state structure for a long, long time.

There are in fact two regional players with some clout and credibility in the region – Turkey and Iran. They maintain a modest rivalry. But Turkey does not seek to be the "champion of the Sunnis." Nor does Iran simply seek to be the "champion of the Shiites." Iraqi Shiites are grateful for Iranian support in time

of crisis, but they are an ancient and proud Arab people; they are not Iranian and will resist Iranian efforts to dominate them.

Both Turkey and Iran clearly share a desire for a united Iraq under some sectarian balance. Neither Turkey nor Iran want jihadis to rule Iraq, or even the Sunni regions. Turkey does want greater acknowledgment of Iraqi Sunni rights. Actually, Iran wants the same – once the jihadi threat has passed – because an unstable Iraq wracked by civil war does not serve Iranian interests either.

The single most destructive regional power at this point is Saudi Arabia and its satellites who bankroll the extremist Sunni jihadis in both Syria and Iraq. Its blatantly sectarian stance has everything to do with Gulf geopolitics and little to do with Shiism as such: Iran would be a rival to Saudi Arabia even if it were Sunni to the core.

Iraq, perhaps with help from its two neighbors, must come to terms with its own internal crisis. It can do so; sectarianism as a guiding obsession is not written in stone. Strong sectarian identity currently reflects the insecurities and fears of a complex society in chaos and political and social transition. US intervention, already once disastrous, can only delay the day when Iraqis must deal with each other again. We cannot fix it. Television images of ISIS aside, the problem belongs to the region more than it does to us.

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Article 7.

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Whose Palestine?

Nathan Thrall

June 19, 2014 -- For a moment in early June, it seemed to many Palestinians that their political leadership was on the verge of making a historic shift. On June 2, seven years of political division—between the unelected government in the West Bank dominated by Fatah, and the elected government in Gaza controlled by the Islamist party Hamas—formally came to an end. Hamas ministers in Gaza resigned, surrendering their authority to a new government of national consensus that would rule over both Gaza and the West Bank. More important, the new government pledged to adhere to the three principles long demanded by the US and its European allies as conditions for receiving vital Western aid: non-violence; adherence to past agreements; and recognition of Israel.

But on June 12, the new Palestinian arrangement was thrown into question by the abduction of three Israeli teenagers studying at yeshivas in the West Bank. The Israeli government is holding Hamas accountable for the kidnapping, and US Secretary of State John Kerry has also accused the group, though Hamas has not claimed responsibility and so far no evidence has been provided. The resulting crackdown on Hamas by Israeli forces

working in coordination with Palestinian security forces in the West Bank, meanwhile, has renewed doubts that President Mahmoud Abbas can advance Palestinians toward unity. Before the abductions, Israeli, American, and European opposition to real power-sharing between Fatah and Hamas was too great to allow meaningful Palestinian reconciliation, even if the two parties wanted it; today national unity seems more distant still.

Yet it is not obvious that this should be so. Although the US did not change its policy toward Hamas after June 2, it did give formal recognition to the new government. The reason for this recognition was not because Hamas was no longer perceived to be a terrorist organization; it was because, with the Islamist movement's own acquiescence, the new government excluded Hamas, was stacked with ministers committed to opposing Hamas's program, and offered Fatah a foothold in Gaza for the first time in seven years. In Gaza and the West Bank, the new government is understood by all factions to belong to Ramallah. That is no less true today than before the kidnapping. The new government contains not a single Hamas-affiliated minister and strongly resembles the previous Fatah-led government in Ramallah, retaining the same prime minister, deputy prime ministers, finance minister, and foreign minister. It also pledged to pursue the political program of Fatah leader, PLO Chairman, and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, and, most importantly, to meet the three abovementioned conditions for Western aid.

For Hamas, the deal was a difficult and internally unpopular step to take. When the Islamist movement won elections in Gaza and the West Bank in 2006, it earned a popular mandate to rule but was largely prevented from doing so. It refused to adhere to the

three principles, and the US and its European allies expended every effort to cripple it. In the West Bank, authorities were shifted from the elected Hamas prime minister to the office of President Abbas, as Hamas legislators were arrested and Hamas institutions shut down. In Gaza, Hamas's consolidation of power was punished with an economic blockade, international isolation, attempts by US-backed Palestinian security forces to take by force what Fatah had lost at the ballot box, and a seven-year-long boycott by over 60,000 Palestinian Authority employees in Gaza, who were paid to stay home in an effort, ultimately unsuccessful, to bring down the Hamas government there.

But in early June, to the great surprise of Fatah, Egypt, Israel, and the US, Hamas agreed to renounce responsibility for administering Gaza, handing over governance to a group of unelected figures while staying silent as the new ministers were sworn to adhere to the principles Hamas had steadfastly rejected since 2006. Hamas was not deterred even by President Abbas's statement, in the days before the handover, that it was a "sacred duty" to continue what the Islamist movement regards as treasonous cooperation between Palestinian and Israeli security forces, a practice that has dramatically suppressed Hamas's military, political, charitable, and social activity in the West Bank. Rather than taking to the airwaves with their outrage and threatening to pull out of the reconciliation agreement as they have done in similar circumstances in the past, Hamas leaders limited themselves to sardonic remarks: "Abbas's security cooperation," one senior leader in Gaza told me, "is more sacred than Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa mosque."

For years, Palestinian reconciliation had been inhibited by,

among other things, the threat of Israeli sanctions, international boycotts, and a cut in Western funding to the Palestinian Authority if Hamas were allowed into government. If carried out, these threats would further enfeeble the Palestinian economy and undermine one of the primary incentives for Palestinians to accept the West Bank leadership's political program of state-building, non-violence, and bilateral negotiations toward a two-state settlement. Hamas had no assurance that if it again defeated Fatah in elections it would not face the same fate as in 2006. The two sides were also locked in innumerable and immovable disagreements about matters including security cooperation with Israel, the strategy of pursuing negotiations to achieve independence, Hamas's exclusion from the PLO, control over security forces, and the independence of various armed groups in Gaza.

The June 2 agreement did not resolve any of these issues. What it did instead was provide a way for Hamas to buy time, pushing the burdens of governance and salary payment in Gaza onto Ramallah while allowing President Abbas to claim that he now represents all Palestinians in negotiating with Israel and advocating for Palestine on the international stage. The deep differences on how to reconcile and eventually unify would then be dealt with after the new government was formed.

Whether by accident or design, it was a clever strategy for both Fatah and Hamas. If the two sides had sought to compromise on their substantive disputes, they would have implied to the international community that Hamas had influence over the new government, thereby triggering automatic cuts in US funding to the Palestinians. But by agreeing to leave all these issues unresolved while forming the most innocuous post-

reconciliation government imaginable, Hamas and Fatah forced the Palestinian Authority's donors to decide whether they would boycott a government formed entirely on Abbas's terms. Then, if the issues in dispute were addressed slowly and incrementally, donors would be forced with each new development to decide whether some small step toward compromise with Hamas—such as the convening of the Hamas-majority Palestinian parliament that has been dormant since 2007, or the passing of new laws within it—is sufficiently upsetting to risk a collapse of the economic and security edifice of the West Bank and Gaza.

Thus far, the downside to this strategy has been borne entirely by Hamas. In the days following the agreement, Fatah was quick to take credit, and most Palestinians saw the deal as an act of capitulation by a greatly weakened, financially depleted, and politically isolated Hamas. Many Palestinians knew that the Islamist movement felt compelled to hand over formal authority to the Ramallah government above all because of the unprecedented hostility it faced from Egypt's new leader, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Upon taking power in July 2013, Sisi tightened the border controls imposed on Gaza, further sealing the main exit for Gazans to reach the outside world, and destroyed the majority of the Egypt-Gaza tunnels that had carried goods whose taxation made up a significant portion of the Hamas government's revenues.

By formally renouncing administrative responsibility for Gaza, the Islamist movement gave away most of its leverage. It will have trouble forcing Abbas to abide by the agreement and to make new concessions to Hamas as disputed issues begin to be discussed. Indeed, both Abbas and the Palestinian prime minister have stated that they refuse to pay the roughly 40,000

government employees in Gaza, who have until now been paid by Hamas. They are reluctant even to facilitate payment by other countries, such as Hamas's ally Qatar, because the Palestinian Authority's American and European donors would fear being charged with indirectly supporting Gaza employees who belong to Hamas.

Meanwhile, many Gazans complain they haven't seen any benefits from the deal. Electricity outages still average twelve hours per day. The crossing with Egypt remains almost entirely shut. Israeli bans on the import of crucial building materials have not been relaxed. Israel and the US still oppose true reunification of the government ministries in Ramallah and Gaza, as well as the convening of a functioning Palestinian parliament. If Israel, Egypt, the US, and Europe hoped to weaken Hamas and strengthen Fatah by demonstrating to Gaza's residents the benefits of replacing Hamas rule with that of Fatah's pro-Western leaders, they were doing a very poor job of it. A common refrain in Gaza was that the cause of the siege had been lifted, but the siege had not.

Then came last week's abduction of three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank. With the help of Abbas's security forces, Israel has taken the opportunity to arrest some three hundred West Bank Palestinians and counting, most of them Hamas members, and it has threatened to deport some to Gaza. This is Israel's largest operation against Hamas in the West Bank since the second intifada. Residents of Hebron, the West Bank's largest governorate, describe themselves as besieged. For several years Hamas has spoken of the need to stir up resistance among the largely docile residents of the West Bank. In this sense, at least, Israel's reaction to the kidnappings seems likely to advance

Hamas's goal.

Among Palestinians, Abbas's response to the abductions has compromised his standing, by highlighting the extent of his security cooperation with the Israeli army as it closes off large West Bank population centers and raids Palestinian refugee camps. Unlike the security cooperation that is used routinely to put down his factional rivals in the West Bank, these actions are seen by many Palestinians, and not just Hamas supporters, as against the national interest, an attempt to thwart the freeing of incarcerated Palestinian national heroes in exchange for the Israeli captives. Whereas Abbas sat through nine months of settlement building during fruitless and humiliating negotiations with Israel and could not even achieve the release of all 104 prisoners that the US told him Israel had promised, his rivals are suspected, by Fatah and Israel alike, of having just begun the process of bringing home many more.

In the last prisoner exchange between Hamas and Israel, in October 2011, 1,027 Palestinian prisoners, among them those serving the longest sentences, were traded for a single Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit. For three kidnapped teenagers—should the captors manage to negotiate a trade—Palestinians will likely demand the release of a large number of prisoners, well beyond the total incarcerated since the kidnapping. As with the Shalit exchange, such an outcome would significantly weaken Abbas, who is already being attacked for his response to the kidnapping, with his chief Fatah rival, Muhammad Dahlan, saying that it represents an abandonment of the Palestinian people. Two weeks ago, Fatah could claim Hamas's resistance project was all but finished. Today it is also the future of Abbas's program that looks uncertain.

At the same time, the abductions, especially if they turn out to have been orchestrated by Hamas, may strengthen Abbas's hand in the continued exclusion of Hamas from power. The kidnapping allows Abbas to argue more forcefully that he cannot possibly be seen to make concessions to the Islamist movement, given Hamas's heightened opprobrium and the sensitivity of US and other donors to the charge of giving succor to the perpetrators of the abduction. Far from posing a significant setback to either Abbas or the Obama administration, the capture of the three yeshiva students, if indeed conducted by Hamas, could allow both to pursue the path they had sought out from the beginning: reconciliation on Abbas's terms, without reciprocation. Whatever embarrassment the kidnapping might cause the US and Abbas, it will enable squeezing Hamas further.

The larger question is how long the West Bank status quo will last. No successful national liberation movement has depended so heavily—in the realms of finance, security, diplomacy, and mediation—on the closest ally of its occupier. US funding to the Palestinians is an obstacle to, or excuse for refraining from, just about every means of leverage against Israel that Palestinians might employ. For the Ramallah leadership, maintaining strong ties with the US means it cannot encourage popular protests in the West Bank, cannot limit cooperation on security when Israel invades areas ostensibly under Palestinian Authority control, cannot attempt to join a number of UN agencies and international institutions, cannot grant political freedoms to non-militants in Hamas, cannot meaningfully share power with Hamas in the PLO, and, not least, cannot allow real democracy in Palestine. Hamas argues that US financial and security assistance—together averaging roughly $300 million

annually—should be replaced by funding from Qatar, among others, because the costs of US dependency are simply too great. The Islamist movement came to power in 2006 because of President George W. Bush's program of democracy promotion; in the years since Hamas's victory, US policy toward Palestinians has shifted to democracy prevention. But what the US approach seeks above all else to achieve—a final settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—is unlikely to be won with leaders who lack a popular mandate.

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