

IRAQ: THE BATTLE AROUND THE "SHIELD OF THE ARABS"

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Though European and American interest is now focused in the dramatic uprising in Syria, another major country of the region, Iraq, seems to be a few steps away from the abyss of an all-out sectarian strife. It is interesting to note that the Iraqi political and security elites were deeply concerned about the complete withdrawal of the US troops from the country and they were, thus, deeply divided over whether to support such a withdrawal. They questioned the ability of the security forces to maintain law and order, to avert sectarian violence and to defend Iraq's borders from external threats.

Moreover, the consolidation of a strong centralised authority is not welcomed by the Kurds. Having gone through terrible experiences of brutal coercion by one-party's centralised authority, they look for a loose federal system and, in the meantime, they prefer seeing this authority governed by frail balances instead of having one party monopolising all sectors in the country. They chose to build balanced relations with all parties and they did not oppose the Iran's stand for a renewal of the ruling State of Law coalition's term. Their most important issues remained the oil-wealth Kirkuk area as well as the establishment of a federation, as complete independence looks remote under the current circumstances. Iraqi Kurdistan is however becoming a region of a peculiar Turkish-Iranian "condominium". Turkish-Iraqi trade has reached USD 10 billion, half of which is with the Kurdish Regional Government. Both Iran and Turkey have an interest in spoiling any prospect for an independent Iraqi Kurdistan. They both have significant Kurdish population and face threats from Kurdish nationalist guerrilla groups operating from Iraqi Kurdistan.

The ascent of the Shia majority in power has of course given Iran a major geopolitical asset. Shiite identity has become active and Iran's support for Syria, the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Hamas movement, Iraq and the Shiite communities in the Gulf area has been one of the pillars of Iranian foreign policy. A rather blatant acknowledgement of this pillar has come from the leader of the Jerusalem Battalion at the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Maj. Gen. Qassem Suleimani in his statement that "Lebanon and Iraq fall under Iranian authority..." Although the Iranian Ambassador in Beirut denied the actual wording, the statement underpins the argument that Iraq and South Lebanon remain valuable geopolitical assets, more so since Syria's Alawite regime is crumbling. Al-Maliki, the Iraqi premier, is accused of directing security apparatus against Sunni political opponents by connecting them either to terrorism or to the disbanded and outlawed Ba'ath Party. Iraqi leadership is so fragmented that Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlaq, while in a visit in Qatar, expressed his grave

fears about an imminent outbreak of sectarian strife in Iraq as a result of al-Maliki's policies and called upon the Gulf States to persuade regional powers, i.e. Iran and Turkey, to cease interfering in Iraqi domestic affairs. Turkey's Prime Minister had upset Iraqi leadership by stating that Turkey will interfere in case of bloody sectarian conflict in Iraq.

"Most significantly", as Brian Downing points out in the *Asia Times*, "young men from the tribes have lost the jobs that Saddam's state and later the US surge had given them. The Shi'ite state ended these support systems and many young men are once again available - or they are supported through clandestine revenues from abroad." Salafism remain strong spreading the persuasive message that the root-cause for all hardships, deprivation and humiliation experienced by the Sunnis is their alienation from the straight path of Islam. Iraqi Sunni tribal affiliations cross the Syrian and Saudi borders, forming a wide clandestine network of arms smuggling and revenues. What is more, al-Qaeda with more than a thousand fighters is ready to take part in a sectarian onslaught against the Shiites, redirecting its strategy away from western-linked targets.

Saudi Arabia seems ready to play the bold role of the protector of Sunnis in the region thwarting a surge of the Shiite-Iranian influence. The military intervention in Bahrain is a case in point. Moreover Saudi Arabia is now playing in all major Sunni fronts: from the Sunnis in Syria to the Pashtun tribes in Afghanistan. Iraq is not just one more front. It has been all through history the battlefield of all those who wished to conquer the Middle East. It is called 'the Shield of the Arabs', the frontline between Arab Sunni Islam and the Persian Shiites, from late medieval era to the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, the bloodiest war in the modern history of the Middle East.

United States' record in Iraq seems rather bleak. They prevented the re-creation of a strong Iraqi military, which could guarantee internal and external security and become a steam engine for state building. They will certainly regret it, when the Gulf security is threatened and the battle around the "Shield of the Arabs" becomes all the fiercer.