

Iran Exploiting Middle East Crisis to Spread its Power

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The deteriorating situation in Iraq will open up new opportunities for Tehran's expansionist agenda. The fall of Ramadi, capital of the largely Sunni Anbar province, captured by ISIS on 17th May, has paved the way for a return of the Iranian led Shi'ite militias. Iraqi military forces fled from Ramadi in the face of the ISIS onslaught, forcing an emergency meeting of the Anbar Provincial Council in Baghdad, where they pled with Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to send in the Shi'ite militias, known as the Popular Mobilization Forces, to recapture their city.

The Americans have been reluctant to support this strategy, fearing that it could ignite Shia-Sunni sectarian tensions. They insisted that the Iranian-led militias, commanded by the notorious General Qasem Soleimani, should withdraw from the fight to recapture Tikrit, enabling US-trained Iraqi military forces supported by strategic American airstrikes, to drive ISIS from the city. Based on that success, Haider al-Abadi asked the Americans to repeat the strategy in Ramadi. But the operation failed and the Iraqi military defeat and capture by ISIS of vast quantities of weapons in Anbar province, has once again forced Abadi to call for Iranian assistance.

The Americans now find themselves in an almost impossible position. They must bite their lips and become the de facto allies of the brutal Iranian-led militias in Iraq, while in Yemen, they are openly supporting the recently formed Saudi coalition force battling against Iranian-led Houthi rebels. State Department observers in Washington are scratching their heads in confusion as Obama's US Middle East policy staggers from crisis to crisis.

Meanwhile, the nuclear arms race that everyone feared has begun to take shape. Saudi Arabia looks set to acquire 'off-the-shelf' nuclear weapons from Pakistan, to counter the growing threat from Iran. The Saudis have bankrolled Pakistan's nuclear programme for the past 30 years and now King Salman and his son Prince Mohammad have decided to join the nuclear club, in response to growing anger in the Gulf States at Barack Obama's rush to sign a legacy nuclear deal with the Iranian regime. The fear is that a nuclear-armed Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia will encourage countries like Turkey and Egypt to follow suit, effectively tearing up the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, further destabilizing the Middle East and threatening world peace.

The framework nuclear deal agreed between Iran and the United States, France, Russia, China, Britain and Germany on April 2nd is already in tatters. The ink was barely dry on the deal before Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei threw down the gauntlet, stating that all sanctions would have to be lifted the minute the final treaty is signed at the end of June and that all Iranian military bases were off limits to nuclear inspectors. Obama, desperate for a legacy agreement with Iran, ordered John Kerry to press on with negotiations, despite the fact that the Ayatollah's interjection undermined all of Kerry's

key principles. Kerry had argued forcefully for a phasing out of sanctions as Iran implemented the conditions of the agreement clause by clause. He also knows that virtually all of Iran's nuclear installations are based in military sites. Prohibiting inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) from accessing these key sites would be an impossible impediment to any final deal. But Obama seems undeterred, arguing that sanctions can always be re-imposed if Iran is caught cheating! Leaders of the Gulf States met Obama in Washington on 14th May to express their dismay at the impending deal and now the US Congress is seeking the right to veto any agreement that would not guarantee an end to Iran's nuclear ambitions.

There is growing recognition in Washington that the greatest blunder committed by the US in Iraq was to relinquish the country's nascent post-war order to Iran's malice and mercenaries. Tehran used this unprecedented opening to expand its influence both in Iraq and in the region. This facilitated the unbridled furtherance of its three-decade-old policy of aggression, allowing it to export the "Islamic revolution." It enabled Tehran to solidify control at home and expand the range of its threats to Western interests.

The Iranian regime and its primary proxy, former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, provoked widespread anger among Iraq's Sunni community through violent suppression, exclusion from the body politic, physical annihilation, and forcing Sunni leaders into exile. Nine months after the formation of the international coalition against ISIS, despite heavy bombing in Iraq, the situation has not improved and murder, massacre and ethnic religious cleansing in the country continues. Handing responsibility for the recapture of Ramadi to the Iranian-led Shi'ite militias will simply pour petrol on the flames of sectarian conflict.

Widespread meddling by the Iranian regime, the Quds force and affiliated Shi'ite militias in Iraq and ethnic religious cleansing by Tehran's agents, feeds ISIS from a social perspective and places the Sunni community in the invidious position of having to choose whether to live under the rule of the Iranian regime or under the rule of ISIS. Separating the al-Nakhib area of al-Anbar province and bringing it under the command of Karbala, while dispatching Shi'ite militias to this region, has simply deepened the religious conflict in the zone and strengthened ISIS. Al-Nakhib has a 400 km border with Saudi Arabia, and the Iranian regime wants to keep this path open, enabling it to continue its interference in that country by using this route.

Nine months after al-Abadi came to power, a large proportion of Sunnis are still excluded from the government and even those who were arrested or banished by Maliki at the behest of the Iranian regime, such as Dr. Tariq al-Hashemi, Ahmad al-Alwani, and Rafe al-Issawi, have not been returned to the political process. Equally the tribes that stood against al-Maliki and were strongly opposed to ISIS, have been practically removed from the scene. Iraq is now teetering on the brink of total collapse, with ISIS rampant, the US marginalized and the Iranian regime on the march.

It is time for the UN Security Council to intervene. It cannot continue to stand mutely on the sidelines while Obama blunders, Iranian hegemony increases and the threat of a Middle East arms race deepens. The UN should demand the expulsion of all Iranian Qods Force and Iranian Revolutionary Guards from Iraq. It must demand the complete cleansing of the Iraqi government, the military and security agencies, from the agents of the Iranian regime and Shi'ite militants, together with the restoration of Sunni participation in the political process. The UN must encourage the arming of the predominantly Sunni tribes with heavy and semi-heavy weapons, under the monitoring of the coalition forces, to enable them to fight back effectively against ISIS. And in particular, the UN must tell Obama that no deal with Iran on its nuclear programme is better than a bad deal.

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Note: Struan Stevenson was a Conservative Euro MP representing Scotland from 1999 to 2014. He was president of the European Parliament's Delegation for Relations with Iraq from 2009 to 2014 and is now President of the European Iraqi Freedom Association (EIFA).