



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

PAPER

ISIS and the Façade of Negative Cooperation

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Series: Paper

October 2014

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Since the departure of the last US troops from Iraq in 2011, academics, politicians and strategists have talked about a gradual US withdrawal from the Middle East, and what Hillary Clinton described as a strategic 'pivot' in US foreign policy toward Asia and the Far East.¹ Discussion of this shift worried America's regional allies, in particular the Gulf countries, which have worried that this 'pivot' would mean that their main foreign guardian would abandon them in their struggle against terrorism and a nuclear Iran—a concern that has been shared by America's key ally Israel. However, though the debate in the US has decided that the future of US politics will be determined by Asia and not in the Middle East, the revolutions of the 'Arab Spring' have shown that US involvement in the region is far from 'Mission Accomplished.'

The legacy of Iraq has been like a dark shadow hanging over the State and Defence departments in Washington, and the Obama administration has tried to avoid being dragged into another Middle Eastern adventure at all costs. Not even the Arab Spring's demonstration of the internal fragility of regimes across the region—some of which had been anchors of stability for the US in a turbulent area—has been able to pull the US back in. Thus, despite decades of deep involvement, the 'pivot' has meant that the US response to the most fundamental upheaval in the Middle East since post-colonial times has been one of ambiguity and hesitation. In Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain, American policy is one of irresolute rhetoric and indeterminacy. In Libya, the American military took the backseat in an operation led by European NATO partners and supported by Gulf allies, and in Syria, Obama's 'red lines in the sand' have been constantly blown over.

Demonstrating its disengagement, the capture of Mosul by the 'Islamic State of Iraq and Syria' (ISIS) on 10 June 2014 shocked Washington's decision-makers even though the rise of ISIS and its predecessors had been simmering for years. Stark internal sectarian divides in Iraq were ignored by American officials; cast off as a local problem to be dealt with by the new Iraqi government. Now with a potent jihadist fighting force at the borders of Turkey, deep into Kurdistan, and at the gates of Baghdad, many believe that the US will proactively return to the region with a commitment that has been hitherto absent from the Obama administration. Ahead of this expected re-engagement, regional observers have seen new alliances formed with the US as the superregional chaperone, all carried out in the face of ISIS, the new 'empire of evil.'

¹ Hillary Clinton. "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century

The 'Islamic State' has catalysed a form of regional integration, bringing together Iran with Saudi Arabia as well as Western allies. Even the recently quarrelling GCC states have aligned over the issue, in addition to the historically oppositional Hezbollah and Lebanese Armed Forces.

Though the ranks of those actively fighting ISIS are growing, enhanced cooperation cannot belie the underlying multipolar divisions in the region, and the irreconcilable differences in interests and values that shape each actor's approach to the ISIS-problem. Gause's idea of a new regional Cold War remains as timely as ever, despite the façade of cooperation and collaboration.² The fight against ISIS is just another battleground in this regional Cold War. The cooperating parties could not, moreover, have more different long-term visions for a post-ISIS regional context. Despite the wide consensus that ISIS constitutes a threat, the differences in strategic approaches to long-term regional stability remain deeply divided, as do the ideologies, values and interests of those gathered together to fight them. The only real paradigm shift in this regional Cold War has been that those calling the shots on the ground are non-state actors and transnational groups. This shift has been somewhat absorbed into the status quo system, however, because some of the non-state actors have become tools for regional and Western states, used to further state interests and values. Indeed, it is on these ideologies, value systems and interests where the war is really focused, and it is this war that—in the eyes of the Obama administration—the US should avoid being dragged into. This is why US policy toward ISIS and regional stability has been hesitant, irresolute, and focused on damage control rather than proactively trying to tackle the fundamental socio-political root causes of regional instability.

In early August, the United States commenced air strikes on ISIS targets in Iraq as a way to relieve the pressure on Kurdish Peshmerga and Iraqi Armed Forces who had been on retreat from the effective hybrid fighting force of the ISIS mujahedeen. Gradually, France, the UK, and GCC countries joined what became a US-led coalition fighting ISIS from the air, without putting boots on the ground. Although the media have increasingly labelled the current conflagration 'Gulf War III'³, the intervention lacks

² F. Gregory Gause III. "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," *Brookings Doha Centre Analysis Paper*, No. 11, July 2014, <http://bit.ly/1u24wzN>

³ "Britain set to join Third Gulf War," *Channel 4 News*, 26 September 2014, <http://bit.ly/12YxfVx>; James Lyons, "Gulf War 3: Britain set to strike back at ISIS for atrocities that appalled an entire nation," *Daily Mirror*, September 24, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1DVtCSj>; Robin Wright "A Third Iraq War?," *The New Yorker*, June 17, 2014, <http://nyr.kr/1u24NTr>

the commitment required to not just contain ISIS but to effectively defeat it. Militarily, the US-led coalition is haunted by the legacy of the Iraq Wars, and both its strategic and operational planning are shaped by austerity considerations, general war fatigue, and casualty aversion. The trauma of Iraq serves as a warning to the US administration not to get bogged down in another messy counterinsurgency struggle where the forces they are fighting are ground-savvy, operating in a complex Middle Eastern environment. Not just from a financial point of view, but predominately due to the psychological and human costs of war, the US and its Western allies do not consider the current ISIS threat severe enough to justify a major investment of money, equipment, or manpower.

It is precisely the same set of factors that lead to Western passivity during the unfolding Syrian Civil War: Syria is considered to be a regional issue just like ISIS was in its initial formation. Both 'regional problems' the United States would prefer if there were a regional solution. The anti-interventionist lobbies in Europe and the US are stronger than ever before. Intervention must come at as low a cost as possible, when the crisis at hand is perceived as not concerning vital national interests and values. As long as ISIS terror is geographically contained in the Middle East, security will not be the rallying interest for intervention. However, the values of Western nations are at stake. From an ethical point of view, the atrocities committed—from war crimes to crimes against humanity and even ethnic cleansing—trample on the systems of human rights and rule of law espoused by the West. However, the decay or corruption of Western values in the aftermath of the Arab Spring means that no action has been forthcoming.

While once all that was needed to prompt intervention, abuses of Human Rights, war crimes, crimes against humanity and even the use of WMDs as a means of repression has this time prompted only rhetoric. It was only when the American and UK legacy in Iraq was threatened that the US intervened exercise damage control. Aware that there will not be a quick military solution to the socio-political maladies that lead to the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, Obama has limited this intervention to attritional containment. Any actual solution to the problem will be left to his successor. The strategy has been to leave the human costs of war to be borne by local proxies. In Iraq, support is being granted to the Kurdish Peshmerga who are being trained and equipped by Germany.⁴

⁴ "Germany to supply arms to Kurds fighting IS in Iraq," *BBC*, September 1, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29012159>

In Syria, serious consideration is being given to support a Saudi initiative that would train and equip a brigade of Syrian fighters every year.

Amid the strategic context of Western austerity, war fatigue, and casualty aversion, the Western assessment is that what is assessed as a regional conflict, does not justify a more extensive or proactive commitment. Consequently, regional players are left to help themselves, which they are. Communal sentiments of insecurity in vacuums of state failure have often empowered non-state actors and transnational organizations to provide security, which is precisely what is happening now. Thus, regional state and non-state actors—in the shadow of Western indecisiveness—are conducting the regional Cold War. Though ISIS has spurred negative integration by being established as a common enemy, irreconcilable divides stand between these new bedfellows, difference that pit ideologies, values and interests against each other. The centres of gravity for these ideological and political divides are no longer in the Levant or North Africa, but on the shores of the Gulf. The most polarizing division in the region remains between the Persian and the Arab sphere of influence, and Saudi Arabia and Iran take the leading roles. The visit of the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister to Riyadh in August⁵ showed clearly the fundamental differences in ideology, values and interests that the nations hold. These ideologies determine what the two countries define as their strategic interests, and fall out from their particular value sets. These differing positions continue to divide Iran and the Arab world.

Despite recent efforts at rapprochement between Iran, the Arab world, and the West, following years of political and diplomatic freeze, the most fundamental contentious issue that divides the three remains unresolved: Iran's nuclear program. The regional struggle for influence between Arab Gulf States and Iran has been played out in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and arguably even on the Arabian Peninsula. While Iran continues to support its local proxies—Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Assad regime in Syria, the central government in Iraq as well as Shia groups on the Peninsula—the Arab states strengthen local actors who oppose these proxies. This struggle for influence has manifested itself most noticeably in Syria and Iraq, where Western apathy has provided both camps with a battleground to test their capabilities. To this end, Saudi Arabia and Qatar supported Islamist and jihadist groups in Syria against the repression of the Assad regime, though Saudi Arabia also supported marginalized Sunnis in their effort to

⁵ Michelle Moghtader, et al. "Iran deputy foreign minister to visit Saudi Arabia," *Reuters*, August 25, 2014, <http://reut.rs/1tBjiek>

undermine a Shia-dominated and Iran-sponsored rule of injustice in Iraq. The resulting stalemate between the proxies of Iran and Saudi Arabia eventually benefitted the rise of ISIS, since both sides failed to tackle the underlying socio-political grievances held by the people in Iraq and Syria. This struggle for influence continues to dominate the decision-making of both Iran and Saudi Arabia when it comes to dealing with the 'Islamic State.' In the end, ISIS seems really to be an obstacle to the Arab-Iranian proxy war, which both sides would like to remove, since it cannot be controlled.

The second major divide fuelling the regional Cold War is around political Islam; the region is split between those supporting Islamist groups and those who oppose them. On one side are Qatar and Turkey, who recognize the important role Islamist groups play within the socio-political reality of many Middle Eastern countries. On the other are Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who strictly oppose political Islam as an ideology that they see as threatening the foundation of their political system. This divide has caused recent tension within the GCC states, as the UAE, driven by Islamist paranoia, accused Qatar of supporting subversive Islamist elements within its borders. While tensions between Doha and Abu Dhabi have remained on the level of the rhetorical, they have become physical in Libya where both nations support different actors within the unfolding civil war. What started as a disagreement about Qatar's support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has degenerated into an ideological contest over the role of Islamist ideology in the Middle East. Even in the recent war between Israel and Hamas, Saudi Arabia and the UAE—together with their proxy Egypt—have taken a Hamas-critical stance.

These ideological differences persist even though both sides oppose ISIS as an extremist and terrorist organization. Indeed, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar are all participating in the US-led anti-ISIS coalition. For Qatar, being part of the coalition is part of a wider PR-effort to quash widespread allegations that it had supported ISIS. For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the fight against ISIS is not a PR war, but rather an ideological struggle of existential importance. While there is a consensus between Turkey and Qatar on most policy issues when it comes to security, Turkey's position towards ISIS has remained ambiguous. Turkey, neighbours with Syria, has been able to maintain relative security of its border regions, but at the expense of playing host to hundreds of thousands of Syrian and Kurdish refugees. Turkey seems to see the secular Assad regime and Kurdish PKK forces as equally worrisome threats to its regional security as ISIS. Consequently, Turkey is seeking a strategic solution that would weaken ISIS without strengthening either Assad or the PKK.

The current alignments between state and non-state actors that cross ideological and political divides are merely short-term phenomena fostered by negative integration around ISIS, which has become identified as a common threat. While there appears to be rapprochement between former rivals and even enemies, the newly founded cooperation cannot disguise the deep divisions that continue to fuel the regional Cold War. Ideological differences over values and interests that divide Iran and the Arab world mean that the region is split between those who support Islamist groups and those who oppose them. They split also along the second axis; affiliation to the West or regional players. These divisions make the development of a coherent strategic approach to both militarily combating ISIS on the ground, and engaging the socio-political root causes of ISIS' rise to power.

Since the US has not revised its foreign policy of non-proactive engagement, regional players have taken on the role of maintaining security and stability in the region according to their own interests and values. The inevitable clash of these interests and values will continue to undermine the development of a coherent and comprehensive long-term strategy long after ISIS. Since non-state actors and transnational organizations have increasingly filled the gap as alternative security providers, the organization of the regional security complex given the current alignments and divisions has, it seems, become an ever more difficult task.