

The New “Great Game” in the Middle East: Looking Beyond the “Islamic State” and Iraq

Anthony H. Cordesman

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The U.S. has good reason to try to prevent the creation of a violent, extremist Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, to reverse the gains of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria)/ ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham), and to help move Iraq back towards a more stable and unified form of government. The chances, however, are that the U.S. can at best have only partial success. The U.S. faces years in which Iraq is divided by sectarian and ethnic power struggles, the Syrian civil war continues, facilitating some form of radical Sunni threat crossing the border between Syria and Iraq.

ISIS/ISIL did not suddenly materialize in Iraq in December 2013. For years, the group exploited growing Sunni and Shi'ite sectarian divisions and steady drift towards civil war. For at least the last three years, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki's actions of building his own power structure around a Shi'ite dominated state with close ties to Iran alienated Sunnis and exacerbated tensions.

The U.S. cannot simply intervene in Iraq by attacking ISIS/ISIL. It is a major movement in Syria as well as Iraq. The U.S. must also find some way to limit and roll back ISIS/ISIL – without taking sides in Iraq's broader civil war. At the same time, creating anything approaching a stable Iraq means creating new and lasting political bridges across Iraq's increasingly polarized and divided factions as well as helping to create a more effective and truly national government in Iraq, as well as rebuild Iraqi forces that serve the nation, rather than an increasingly authoritarian Shi'ite leader.

It is far from clear that the U.S. can do this, and Syria and Iraq are only the most visible challenges taking place in the strategic game board that shapes the Middle East. The U.S. must also deal with a much broader set of new strategic forces that go far beyond Iraq's borders. The U.S. must change the structure of its de facto alliances with key Arab states in the region, and it must deal with new forms of competition – or “Great Game” with Russia -- and possibly China, as well.

The Fighting in Iraq Cannot be separated from Syria and Its Impact on Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, the Arab Gulf states, and Iran

It is too soon to assume that Iraq will remain a divided crisis state in spite of current U.S. efforts, but this seems more likely than some sudden Iraqi return to national unity and lasting defeat of Sunni Islamist extremists. What some once feared would become a “Shiite crescent” now seems to be likely to remain a series of unstable enclaves.

As is all too often the case in the Middle East, the game board is changing without any stable rules. New players are being added, and no one can really predict the outcome of the game.

Syria and Iraq seem more likely to be headed for years of enduring instability where the Assad regime and some form of Shi'ite dominated Iraqi government either face an ongoing Sunni Islamist extremist protostate or an enduring form of sectarian conflict. The Iraqi Kurds may create a separate enclave or state – affecting the stability of the Kurdish minorities in Syria, Turkey, and Iran in the process.

Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, the Arab Gulf states, and Iran will all be caught up to some degree in this power struggle – dealing with new Islamist extremist threats from both Sunnis and Shiites, the enduring spillover of refugees, and an ongoing competition for influence over the factions in Syria and Iraq. The U.S. will face years in which it must deal with this same instability, and increasingly compete with Russia and China for influence, regional influence, and various forms of security partnerships and arms transfers.

At the same time, the U.S. and its allies will face lasting instability in all the countries already affected by the upheavals that began in 2011, and where at least some other countries – possibly including Bahrain and Kuwait follow in their path. They will face growing Russian efforts to influence other key Arab states – including Egypt and Gulf states like the UAE. The U.S. and Saudi Arabia have little prospect of creating a stable Yemen, and the instability in the Gulf will be matched by instability in the Red Sea and key states in North Africa like Somalia and Sudan.

There is all too high a possibility that the U.S. and its regional allies now face a decade in which instability in Syria and Iraq interact with instability in other nations in the region, where sectarian and ethnic struggles create new and ever changing problems, and Russia and China create a growing challenge at a time when traditional allies like Britain and France steadily cut their real world power projection capabilities.

The Non-Shi'ite, Non-Crescent

At least for the present, the rise of ISIS/ISIL has shown there is nothing approaching a continuing Iranian zone of influence -- or Shi'ite crescent -- from Iran to Lebanon, but rather a divided Arab Lebanon, a Persian Shiite Iran and now Sunni Islamist extremist protostate located between and Alawite-controlled bloc in Syria and largely Shi'ite blocs in Iraq and Iran.

In practical terms, however, the idea of some form of stable Shi'ite crescent and zone of Iranian influence that extended from Lebanon through Iran has always ignored the different characters of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, and their different national interests.

Lebanon is heavily influenced by the growth in power of its Shi'ite population and the rise of Hezbollah as a key military factor. It is not, however, a Shi'ite state or under Iranian control. It remains a multi-confessional mess that is now greatly complicated by a massive influence of Syrian refugees and a growing faction of Sunni Islamist extremists in the north. The CIA estimates its native divisions as follows: 18 religious sects recognized (2012 est.): Muslim 54% (27% Sunni, 27% Shia), Christian 40.5% (includes 21% Maronite Catholic, 8% Greek Orthodox, 5% Greek Catholic, 6.5% other Christian), Druze 5.6%, very small numbers of Jews, Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and Mormons. Ethnic population: Arab 95%, Armenian 4%, other 1%.

Syria has relatively few actual Shi'ites and its Alawites are a gnostic sect with Christian and other non-Islamic elements that Iran treats as Shi'ite only for political reasons. The CIA estimated its pre-civil war divisions by sect as Muslim 87% (official; includes Sunni 74% and Alawi, Ismaili, and Shia 13%), Christian (includes Orthodox, Uniate, and Nestorian) 10% (includes Orthodox, Uniate, and Nestorian), Druze 3%, Jewish (few remaining in Damascus and Aleppo). It estimated its ethnicity as Arab 90.3%, Kurds, Armenians, and other 9.7%.

Iraq is also deeply divided, but has an Arab Shi'ite majority – most of which follow quietist religious leaders and do not support the concept of a Supreme Leader as advanced by Iran. The CIA estimates Iraq's sectarian, ethnic, and linguistic differences as follows: ethnicity: Arab 75%-80%, Kurdish 15%-20%, Turkoman, Assyrian, or other 5%. Sect: Muslim (official) 99% (Shia 60%-65%, Sunni 32%-37%), Christian 0.8%, Hindu <.1, Buddhist <.1, Jewish <.1, folk religion <.1, unaffiliated .1, other <.1. Languages: Muslim (official) 99% (Shia 60%-65%, Sunni 32%-37%), Christian 0.8%, Hindu <.1, Buddhist <.1, Jewish <.1, folk religion <.1, unaffiliated .1, other <.1.

Iran is primarily Shi'ite but is nominally "Persian" rather than Arab and is controlled by religious leaders firmly under the control of a Supreme Leader. The CIA estimates Iraq's sectarian, ethnic, and linguistic differences as follows: Ethnicity: Persian 61%, Azeri 16%, Kurd 10%, Lur 6%, Baloch 2%, Arab 2%, Turkmen and Turkic tribes 2%, other 1%. Sect: Muslim (official) 99.4% (Shia 90-95%, Sunni 5-10%), other (includes Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian) 0.3%, unspecified 0.4% (2011 est.). Languages: Persian (official) 53%, Azeri Turkic and Turkic dialects 18%, Kurdish 10%, Gilaki and Mazandarani 7%, Luri 6%, Balochi 2%, Arabic 2%, other 2%.

These different mixes of religion, ethnicity, and language in each country help explain their current internal instability and struggles for power, and the limits of any effort to create a stable pattern of Iranian influence, Pan-Arab influence, or any other form of regional stability. They also help explain why the strategic map of this part of the Middle East has produced so much tension, conflict, and change over time.

Syria's elder Assad, Hafez al-Assad, showed a remarkable ability to use force and political manipulation maintain authoritarian control over Syria and some degree of control over Lebanon for several years. His opposition to his fellow Ba'athist –Saddam Hussein; and his support of Iran during the Iran-Iraq War set the precedent for an alliance where it is now Iran that aids Syria. Hafez al-Assad is gone, however, and his son Bashar has chosen repression and civil war over reform unleashing the same kind of sectarian and ethnic violence that occurred in Iraq between 2004 and 2009 and that has been reborn by Maliki's treatment of Iraq's Sunnis and Kurds since 2011.

The deep sectarian and ethnic differences within Iraq show how difficult it is for any one faction to dominate the country on a stable basis or to assume that Iraq can now be divided into stable sectarian and ethnic blocs. Moreover, Iraq's sectarian and ethnic structure has changed steadily since 2003, as civil fighting and terrorist violence steadily divided Iraq back along sectarian and ethnic lines.

Thanks largely to Maliki's repression and efforts use his position to ensure Shi'ite dominance, Iraq is now even more divided into largely Sunni enclaves in Western and Western Iraq, Shiite enclaves in much of Eastern and Southeast Iraq, and a Kurdish enclave in Northern and North Eastern Iraq. The mixed enclaves in and around Baghdad and scattered elsewhere in the country

--including the far southern border area with Kuwait have also become more polarized into separate sectarian residential and business areas.

It is not clear how many Iraqis in each area – with the exception of the Kurds – now really want to trade their Iraqi identity for a sectarian or ethnic identity. Moreover, the areas that are largely Sunni and Shi'ite in Iraq are themselves divided into complex mixes of comparative moderates and religious extremists.

Moreover, no one should assume that ISIS/ISIL has broad Sunni support for its religious and social extremism as distinguished from a popular desire to reject Maliki and the abuses he unleashed in terms of governance, sharing the nation wealth, and misuse of Iraq's increasingly sectarian and politicized security forces. ISIS/ISIL faces serious potential challenges from other major Sunni Islamist and Baathist blocs as well as tribal groups. At the same time, these groups are divided from each other tribal groups cross sectarian and ethnic lines, and Anbar and Mosul have somewhat different political identities.

The Uncertain Rise of ISIS/ISIL and Creation of an Islamic State

The current focus on Iraq has shifted attention away from Syria, but Assad and Maliki have played an equal role in creating today's ISIS/ISIL threat. The Syrian civil war that began in 2011 did not extend Iranian influence as much as shift the competition between Iran and the Arab states to a new front -- as well as put new pressures on the U.S. and Israel. Long before ISIS/ISIL emerged as a key threat it effectively divided Syria into Assad's Alawite-led faction in the west and center, and a mix of over 70 Sunni-dominated factions in the east ranging from moderate nationalist to Sunni Islamist extremists.

The Syrian civil war also drew in foreign Jihadists, led the Hezbollah to become deeply involved in supporting Assad, drew in Iran, and gave Russia new leverage in the region at a time when the crisis in the Ukraine made Russia far more active in competing with the U.S. and Europe.

At present, Sunni Islamist extremist groups like the Al Nusra Front and ISIS/ISIL dominate the fighting against Assad and control of Syrian territory in Eastern and Northeastern Syria -- while also fighting each other as well as other Sunni factions. It is not clear how long this mix of regime vs. rebel and rebel vs. rebel fighting will go on, but it is clear that it not only currently divides Syria but also has given ISIS/ISIL a strategic base for its advances into Iraq.

At the same time, the Arab Sunni vs. Shiite/Arab vs. Kurd tensions in the Iraq that have increasingly helped to divide the country since 2011 -- and gave ISIS/ISIL both popular Sunni support and a power vacuum to exploit -- are scarcely new. Iraq's Kurds have repeatedly become involved in ethnic struggles ever since Iraq was founded.

Sunni-Shi'ite tensions repeatedly led to violence after the start of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, and were never brought fully under control after the end of that war in 1988 or the uprisings at the end of the first Gulf War in 1991. They were the core of the civil war between 2003 and 2008 and the U.S. left a point low-level fighting was still going on in 2011.

The indecisive outcome of Iraq's 2010 election, failed U.S. diplomacy and resolve, and Iran's careful focus on winning influence and ensuring Shi'ite dominance kept Maliki in power. Efforts

to create a truly national government like the Erbil Agreement quickly became a hollow shell. Maliki emerged as a dominant authoritarian figure, took personnel control of the security forces, and used them against Iraq's Sunnis in ways that created the conditions that led to a new round of Sunni-Shi'ite fighting from 2012 to the present. At the same time, the increasingly sectarian civil war in Syria helped give the movement that became ISIS/ISIL the resources and military experience to challenge the Iraqi security forces Maliki had politicized and corrupted.

ISIS/ISIL could never have mutated and reemerged as a major force if Maliki's actions in alienating Iraq's Sunnis had not allowed it to emerge as a major military factor in Anbar in December 2013 – capitalizing on broad Sunni support as well as the support of other armed Sunni factions. Maliki must also take much of the blame for increasing the divisions between the Kurds and his central government that have steadily increased ethnic divisions and pushed the Kurds toward a referendum.

The first half of 2014 has shown that Maliki has not changed, but they both he and Assad have helped create a major new threat. On June 30, 2014, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani -- the spokesman for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) -- issued a statement on the beginning of Ramadan that ISIL had established a new Islamic "caliphate" out of the territory it held across Iraq and Syria. Al-Adnani also stated that Baghdadi had become, "the imam and caliph for Muslims everywhere," and that the ISIL-held territory in Syria and Iraq should now be called the "the Islamic State."

Iraq's Uncertain Future Players: The Sunnis

So far, U.S., UN, and Arab efforts to forge a new and more national government in Iraq have failed, and the rising competition for influence over Iraq and its forces between the U.S., Russia, and Iran has failed to produce any major improvements in Iraq's forces.

It is still far from clear that ISIS/ISIL can make a lasting change in the strategic game board. ISIS/ISIL is a movement that U.S. experts' estimate only had some 10,000 fighters – with a core of some 3,000 truly experienced fighters – as of mid-June 2014. It seems doubtful that a movement so small can successfully defeat Iraq government forces that remain far larger and better equipped, and which now will be supported on large Shi'ite territory by both the population and Shi'ite militias.

It is unclear that ISIS/ISIL can keep the support of other armed Sunni factions and tribal groups in Iraq, or govern in ways that maintain popular support in either Syria or Iraq.

ISIS/ISIL has similar ideological and religious goals to the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), but there reports of clashes over ISIS/ISIL efforts to win tribes under JAM control in June 2014.

The Islamic Army of Iraq (IAI) or Sunni Popular Movement is more focused on Sunni federalism than a Caliphate, and has had problems in dealing with ISIS/ISIL in the past because it is seen as too political and accommodating.

The Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order (Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandia, or JRTN) is the second largest armed Sunni force, but is a much more secular Sunni movement with links to former Bath leaders like Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri. It has competed to establish its own command as the General Military Council for Iraq's Revolutionaries" (GMC).

The Jamaat Ansar Al-Islam (JAI) has much in common with ISIS/ISIL or a religious basis been has clashed with it in the past in struggles for influence and power in Ninevah and the Mosul area.

The remnants of the 1920s Revolution Brigades seem too weak to really matter as does the Saraya al-Madina al-Munawara (The Honoured City's Brigades), which is a local force in Fallujah with some ties to ISIS/ISIL.

It is equally unclear that ISIS/ISIL can create anything approaching a viable economy and functional structure of governance in a closed enclave that crosses the border between the two states but has only uncertain access to trade and imports from a hostile Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia, as well as fight an Assad enclave in the west, Iraqi government enclave in the east, and Iraqi Kurdish enclave in the north.

In short, the Islamic state could last for weeks, months, or years. So, however, could the political disarray in Iraq's government and critical weaknesses in the Iraqi security forces and the growing polarization of the nation into Shi'ite Arab, Sunni Arab, and Kurdish enclaves.

Moreover, any defeat of the "Islamic State" that involves the broad repression of Syrian and Iraqi Sunnis will mean both regimes will constantly have to focus on repression and control rather than development and stability. Both will remain dependent on whatever outside Iranian and Russian support they can get, while trying to play the U.S. and Arab states off against Iran and Russia. The end result will be to worsen Sunni and Shi'ite/Alawite tensions, create even more problems in governance and economics, and keep the region unstable regardless of how strong a Syrian or Iraqi authoritarian façade will seem.

Iraq's Uncertain Future Players: The Shi'ites

Shi'ites face tensions between their own comparative moderates and extremist factions and militias. Sistani – Iraq's most senior and respect cleric -- has long been a voice for Iraqi unity and the emergence of a national government while Sadr has shifted between more national and more Shi'ite positions. The oil rich Shi'ite provinces in the south had raised the issues of some form of federalism that would give them a larger share of oil revenue, while the key Shi'ite Shrine cities have a broader sectarian identity.

Maliki and Sistani's calls for volunteers has also led to a revival of Shi'ite extremism by hardline and other Shi'ite clerics like Mahmoud al-Sarkhi – as well as similar "Fatwas" and sermons by Sunni extremist clerics. Reviving Shi'ite militias and forces like the Asaib Ahl al-Haq, which remained active after Sadr disbanded the Mahdi Army and has had Iranian and IRC support -- has helped the Iraqi security forces in Diyala province, and Baghdad area, but has no direct loyalty to the Iraqi government and will strengthen a splinter faction that could make it even more difficult to heal the breaches between Sunni and Shi'ite.

Groups like the Ketaeb Hezbollah – which the U.S. designates as a terrorist organization -- present the same problems. So does the new Saraya al-Salam (Peace Brigades) Sadr is now forming to defend religious sites like Samarra as well as Baghdad -- and which brings back former Mahdi Army fighters.

Iraq's Uncertain Future Players: The Kurds

Iraq's Kurds are now involved in a power struggle with Iraq's Arab and central government that may or may not turn violent. The stronger the central government becomes, the more it will oppose Kurdish independence and try to roll back Kurdish rule over the disputed areas in the northwest and around Kirkuk in the northeast.

The Kurds may or may not be able to hold onto the mixed areas and Kirkuk they now control. They also remain divided between the Barzani faction and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), a steadily weaker Talibani faction and *Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)* (caused in part by Talibani's illness), and reform factions that oppose the corruption and abuses of power by both the KDP and PUK.

The Kurds also, however, are involved in broader regional issues. Iraq's Kurds have to deal with the fact there are Kurdish minorities in Syria, Turkey, and Iran that all want more rights and some degree of ethnic autonomy. Iraq's Kurds are critically dependent on Turkey as their only real alternative to dependence on exports and trade through Iraq.

Iraq's Kurds will have to concentrate on the security threats posed by the Iraqi central government and Arab factions on their "borders" with Iraq. This means keeping a distance from Turkey's Kurds, and not playing an active role in supporting either Syria or Iran's Kurds in their search for added rights and identity. No one, however, can ignore the potential instability inherent in Iraq's Kurds turning to Turkey while Turkey is still trying to control its own Kurds.

The "Crescent of Instability"

More broadly, it is all too easy to draw large colored maps of ethnic and sectarian divisions, but these geographic blocs conceal radically different population densities in an increasingly urbanized country. Dividing water, power, roads, pipelines, water, and communications infrastructure present a national problem. So does the common need for access to the Gulf, Turkey, and the Arab world. No critical aspect of Iraq's territory, infrastructure, and economy divide easily along sectarian and ethnic lines.

Moreover, it is important to remember that every step that reinforces the division of both Iraq and Syria also creates or reinforces patterns of refugees and displaced persons. It puts growing economic, refugee, and security strains on Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and the Arab Gulf states, and creates new sectarian and ethnic tensions in neighboring states as well as disenfranchised populations that are the natural breeding ground for terrorism and extremism. Iraq and Syria will not have clear borders in meaningful security terms and their problems will interact with the all too real internal problems of their neighbors.

Events Creating a New Great Game

Syria and Iraq are also changing the nature of U.S. competition with Iran, Russia, and China. The U.S./Europe, Russia, and Iran -- along with the Arab Southern Gulf states -- may share a common interest in defeating ISIS/ISIL and Sunni Islamist extremists, but their other interests differ sharply and seem increasingly likely to do so on an enduring basis as they pursue their very different strategic interests.

Syria has now been an active area of U.S. and European competition with Iran and Russia for three years. ISIS/ISIL gains have triggered an even more intense competition between the U.S. and Iran for influence over the Iraqi government – a competition where the U.S. now faces a significant Iranian advisory presence on the ground, Iran’s willingness to return combat aircraft that Iraqi flew to Iran in 1991, and a major challenge from Russia that is now rushing Su-25s to Iraq and helping to arm Iraq as well as the Assad forces in Syria.

At the same time, the Ukraine crisis has led Russia to actively seek new alliances and influence in the Middle East and developing world. Russia is now attacking the U.S. role in the Middle East – and particularly in Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq -- as part of what Russia calls the “color revolution.” Russia is now seeking to broaden its influence in Egypt, the Arab Gulf, and throughout the region as well as in Syria and Iraq. It is doing so by accusing the U.S. – and Europe to some degree – of creating political upheavals in an effort to control regional states, and of using partners and proxies as a replacement for military force while seeking to create governments and factions that it can control to serve its interests. At the same time, Russia is accusing the U.S. of pursuing failed strategies the end in instability and civil conflict.

These developments seem likely to lock the U.S. and Europe into a lasting competition with Russian and Iran for more influence in Iraq, Syria and the region. Moreover, every faction in Syria and Iraq – and to a lesser degree Lebanon – has a growing incentive to play outside powers off against each other in a new and Middle Eastern version of the Great Game.

Changes in Other Parts of Game Board

At the same time, other critical aspects of the game board are changing. Iraq and Syria’s growing and unstable divisions are one key to the change game board in the Middle East. So, however, are events like the prospect of a failure or disarray in dealing with the P5+1 talks with Iran and the fact that Iran’s growing missile and asymmetric warfare forces challenge both the other Arab Gulf states and the U.S.

Yemen, the Horn of Africa, and Red Sea are additional players. The stability of Egypt and growing Russian efforts to win influence there, the stability of Jordan in the face of new Islamist and refugee threats, Turkey’s internal political and economic problems, and tensions with the Shi’ites in Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE add to the board. So does Israel’s concern with Iran nuclear efforts, its tensions with the Palestinians, and the growing conventional missile and rocket threat to Israel in Gaza and Lebanon.

No one can afford to forget that the sectarian and ethnic divisions in Syria and Iraq are matched by similar other divisions throughout Islam that can suddenly explode with limited warning. Moreover, the power struggle for the future of the region (and Islam) is scarcely just a struggle between Sunni and Shi’ite.

The most serious divisions in Islam may ultimately be the divisions between religious moderates and violent religious extremist within the Sunni and Shi’ite blocs, and involving a host of different positions and armed factions. In the process, religious minorities ranging from Christian to smaller Islamic factions are being threatened and driven out of the region. A steady

process of segregation and exclusion is taking place as the smaller and weaker religious faction leaves and mixed areas become more and more Sunni, Shi'ite, or Alawite dominated.

Other Underlying Forces Changing the Board and the Rules

At the same time, there are underlying demographic and economic forces that are reshaping the game board throughout the region. Virtually every state faces massive demographic pressures on its infrastructure, education and medical systems, and economy. There has been a massive increase in overall population of the MENA area since 1950. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, population of Egypt, the Levant, the Gulf States and the rest of the Arabian Peninsula increased from 59.9 million in 1950 to 116.0 million in 1975, 238 million in 2000, and 314.4 million in 2014 – an increase of more than five times. This total is projected to increase to 371.1 million in 2025 and 469.9 million in 2050.

As a result, every government and political/religious faction must deal with the pressures of a young population where most countries have so far failed to create the mix of governance and growth necessary to meet their rising needs. Many also must deal with a growing inequality of income, hyperurbanization, failed governance, corruption, and major barriers to development. These are all issues that were highlighted in the Arab Developments report that warned of growing instability for nearly a decade before 2011, and in the World Bank rankings in governance and development.

As events since 2011 have shown, the large population of young men – many without real jobs and status – presents a particularly serious challenge. As Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen show all too clearly, these pressures can fuel a challenge from younger fighters and seekers for status and power. Older elites and tribal grouping are under pressure from such youth – many of whom are now armed and have experience as fighters and whose loyalty is often as much to what they are paid and/or the new status they acquire as sect, ethnicity, or tribe.

The problems go far beyond the current focus on the Syrian civil war and the crisis in Iraq. In Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, the Sudan, and Somalia they have led to political explosions and internal violence that have halted much of the progress in development, made economies much worse, and forced millions of people away from their homes, their jobs and businesses, schools, and any form of stable life while running many people in a slowly emerging Middle Class.

The forces moving the pieces on the game board also go far beyond terrorism and insurgency. They involve critical problems in governance, economics, and human development. They involve forces that cannot be corrected by massive political upheavals or civil conflicts. They also involve forces that cannot be corrected holding elections in countries without effective political structures and capabilities to govern and develop regardless of the outcome of any given election. Put bluntly, democracy is only one aspect of human progress and that may well make things worse without the proper conditions for its success.

Playing the New Great Game

There are regions where the best way to win may well be to stand aside and let the game consume other nations and players. The Middle East is not one of them. The US has to play this game to serve its vital strategic interests, and it has to win if it possibly can.

The U.S. has already taken some steps to adapt to the changes in this game. It has said that it will provide more support to moderate rebel factions in Syria, pressed hard for unity and a national government in Iraq, and laid the groundwork for a stronger U.S. advisory mission and possible air strikes in Iraq. It has taken steps to reassure its Arab allies in the Gulf and the region that it will maintain its strategic role and forces in the Middle East, will keep up the pressure on Iran to eliminate its nuclear weapons program and does not see any P5+1 agreement as the prelude to some major near-term rapprochement with Iran.

Nevertheless, there is probably a higher chance of failure in each such area than success and U.S. needs to think strategically about the region over the next decade, rather than focus on a given short term crisis. This means putting first things first, rather than simply focusing on the crisis in Iraq and Syria. In practice, it means taking the following steps:

- **Focus on partnership and stability in key regional allies:** For all of the reasons just outlined, the U.S. should focus on first things first. The U.S. may or may not be able to reduce the current level of crisis in countries like Syria and Iraq. The overall structure of U.S. success in the Middle East will be determined by its ability to keep crises from spreading and keep states like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan as key allies, maintain close relations with Oman, help stabilize Bahrain and seek to influence Qatar to work more closely with its other partners in the GCC.

The key U.S. strategic interest in the MENA area remains the stable and securer flow of petroleum exports to the global economy, and avoiding any dominant influence by Iran or an outside state like China or Russia. It needs to rebuild the trust of the Arab Gulf states, show them that it will remain a key security partner, show that it will help them build a stable deterrent to Iran and deal with extremism and terrorism. It needs to convince them that the U.S. will not somehow sacrifice their interest to obtain a form of rapprochement with Iran, and will actually support them in an emergency. U.S. actions in Iraq, in dealing with Egypt and Libya, in failing to act decisively in Syria, and in holding secret negotiations with Iran as part of the P5+1 talks, in talking carelessly about a “pivot” to Asia without reassuring allies in the Middle East, have all left a cumulative legacy.

The US has made a beginning in rebuilding this level of confidence over the last year and a half, but no one can visit the Gulf region without being aware just how much distrust now exists of the U.S., how uncertain the Arab Gulf states are about U.S. willingness to act, and the conspiracy theories about the goals in the U.S. dialogue with Iran.

The U.S. needs to firmly face the fact that it is traditional Sunni-led monarchies which have proved to be both the most stable U.S. partners in the region and the regimes that have done the most to provide their populations with security and development. They are the key to stable world energy exports, to checking Iran, to limiting the growth of

Islamic extremism and Jihadist terrorism, and to any stable evolutionary movement towards reform.

It is true that even those states with substantial oil wealth may not be able to avoid the upheavals in other MENA states. The U.S. should continue encourage reform in Jordan and the Gulf states, encourage proper limits to the use of security and counterterrorism forces, and encourage the Gulf states to improve their treatment of Shi'ites and to avoid supporting Sunni extremism.

These goals, however, need to be kept in proportion, made the mission of individual U.S. country teams, and given a focus based on national differences, priorities, and windows of opportunity. The U.S. also needs to give as much *or more* priority to better governance, better rule of law, economic development, and dealing with the challenges of population growth as to democracy and concepts of human rights that ignore the need for stability.

- **Focus on the truly violent extremist and terrorist threat without taking sectarian or ethnic sides, or sides in a civil war:** The U.S. cannot ignore the immediate threat posed by Sunni Jihadist groups like ISIL/ISIS and their Shi'ite extremist counterparts, but it needs to have a region-wide strategy in dealing with extremism and not lurch from crisis to crisis. It needs to be extremely careful not to label movements and factions that are not extremist in character as terrorist, or follow the example of several regional states in labeling every element of broader movements like the Moslem Brotherhood as terrorists.

The U.S. must also do everything possible to encourage dialogue and compromise between Sunni and Shi'ite within each state and the Islamic world, and to avoid taking sectarian and ethnic sides in any conflict or dispute. This is particularly true of cases like Iraq or Syria, where the U.S. shares a broad interest with regional allies in targeting extremist forces like ISIS/ISIL, but no interest in attacking Sunni forces that oppose the Maliki government for legitimate reasons, or risking the kind of civil casualties that occurred during the earlier U.S.-led fighting in Iraq and that are a problem in Afghanistan.

U.S. advisory and support missions that focus on counterterrorism and security should have the same focus: persuading local allies to focus equally carefully on the real threat, avoid major sweeps and internments, show trials that feed extremism rather than suppress it, and other abuses and misuses of the security process. Improving intelligence, target, damage assessment, internment, trials, reeducation, and reintegration are already part of most U.S. efforts in the region, and should be given even higher priority.

Where the U.S. does actively target extremist movements or leaders, it is critical that it do so in ways that it can publically justify to local populations, work with local partners wherever possible, and avoid have the U.S. keep any prisoners or suspects for more than a brief period – if at all – when it is dealing with a cooperative and partner government.

While striking at leaders a key categories of extremist forces can have a “whack-a-mole” or “mowing the grass character,” they can be effective over time if the U.S. actively seeks the permission and support of local governments with popular support, and narrowly

focuses its strikes on truly guilty. The end result may be a war of attrition, but it is far better than the broader use of force or doing nothing.

At the same time, minimizing a hostile reaction requires U.S. constant efforts at strategic communications. It also requires an instant effort to seize the initiative in explaining such strikes and dealing with any civilian casualties and collateral damage – areas where the U.S. has been good in theory and has often failed in practice.

- **Treat Iraq and Syria as an integrated mix of threats and opportunities.** There are no quick or simple answers to the particular challenges posed Iraq and Syria and every option has serious drawbacks and risks. At the same time, an endless examination of options and uncertain half-measures taken without consistency and the persistence and resources to be effective is now substitute for action.

The U.S. is now increasingly perceived as failing to support either its own interests or those of its allies. It is increasingly perceived as starting initiatives it does not really act upon and as then standing aside rather than either leading from the front or behind.

The U.S. needs to show its regional partners it will make a real commitment, and take some risks on their behalf. While the time window has probably passed in which there moderate rebel factions could drive Assad out of power, this no longer is the issue. The U.S. does, however, still need to work with Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to back moderate rebel factions far more decisively and take risks with the weapons it transfers -- now that hostile rebel factions already have anti-tank guided weapons and some MANPADs.

At a minimum, the U.S. must clearly demonstrate to both its allies and its enemies that it can raise the cost to both the Assad forces and Sunni Islamist extremist factions to levels that neither can easily accept and that is willing to treat its Arab allies as full partners and keep the pressure up on both the Assad forces and extremist factions as long as there is any hope of success.

- **Treat Maliki as much of the threat as ISIS/ISIL and Assad.**

The U.S. should only fully support the Iraqi government if it can actually become a national government and not a Shiite authoritarian fighting a civil war he largely provoked. It should, however, show that it will attack extreme cadres and leaders in ISIS/ISIL and other terrorist factions and do so in both Iraq and Syria – denying the “Islamic state” any border-driven sanctuary.

The U.S. should not attempt to choose a given leader in Iraq, but it should make it clear that there are leaders that it will not fully support, and that the flow of arms, advisors, and that U.S. military support will be directly proportionate to Iraq’s selection of a truly national government.

Prime Minister Maliki has made it all clear over the last three years that he is a self-seeking authoritarian thug that puts Shi’ite factionalism before the unity and security of

the country and is incapable of unifying the country and all too capable of driving it into civil war. His current ties to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and figures like General Qassem Suleimani, the number of Shi'ite extremists and supporter of Iran around him, his constant failure to truly reach out Sunnis or compromise with the Kurds, and his tolerance and encouragement of abuses by the Iraqi security forces rule him out as any kind of meaningful future partner.

If Maliki stays in power -- or the Iraqi government remains under other Shi'ite leaders that actively provoke civil war and sectarian extremism -- the U.S. should work with its European allies to limit the flow of arms and support to any government that is not national, and confront Iraq with the reality that it will actively support Kurdish separatism and its Arab allies in the Southern Gulf in supporting moderate Sunni tribal opposition if Maliki uses the Iraqi security forces to attack Sunni population.

The U.S. should aggressively and publically disclose the extent of Maliki's ties to Iran and economic failures while doing the same in publicizing Russia's support of Assad and Maliki without putting serious constraints on attacks on civil populations. It should also support Turkey and its Arab allies in both containing Sunni Islamist extremists and in pressuring the Iraq government to limit its ties to Iran and the IRGC.

It should limit its support to actions that specifically target ISIS/ISIL and other extremist groups, and restrict arms transfers and use to such ends. It should only intervene if using force to ensure that the "Islamic State" cannot expand further into Shi'ite or mixed areas, not back the Iraqi central government in attacking Sunni areas. It should quietly begin to work with its Arab allies, Turkey, and the Kurds to contain the crisis in Iraq and confront both Iraqi Sunnis and Shi'ite with the reality that neither side can really win and enduring civil conflict between them.

- **Provide strong support for a truly national Iraqi government and encourage Iraq to create some form of federalism and a more workable Basis for Unity**

At the same time, if Iraq should come under a new leader and truly national government, the U.S. should be prepared to provide air, UCAV, and cruise missile strikes against ISIS/ISIL and other military targets, step up training and advisory efforts in country, and expand the use of special forces and national technical means in supporting the Iraqi government. A stick without carrots is no better than a carrot without sticks.

The U.S. should also help Iraqis lay out a framework for federalism that will encourage Iraqi to believe that Arab Shi'ite, Sunni, Kurdish minority rights, political influence, and access to Iraq's oil revenues will be fairly shared and safeguarded. The present constitution hints at the capability to do this, but is so flawed that it almost encourages civil conflict. Iraqis need to see that there is a solution to politics and governance that might actually work, and are currently unable to come together to draft this without outside aid.

- **Ensure Iraqi Kurds have an Option. Seek to step up cooperation with Turkey**

Once again, the best solution is Iraqi unity, but it may not be possible. If the U.S. faces an Iraq that remains divided between Shi'ite authoritarianism and Sunni Islamist extremism, the Kurds present a major option that will keep up pressure on the Baghdad government, check religious extremism and put pressure on Iran.

Creating a stable "Kurdistan" will, however, probably require security aid, and cooperation with Turkey to make create a lasting and stable source of Kurdish oil exports. It will also require U.S. de facto acceptance of the expansion of Kurdish control over the dispute areas and Kirkuk. This is not a desirable outcome relative to national unity or federalism, but it may be a necessary form of realpolitik

- **Contain the Assad regime as much as possible and keep the option open for a moderate opposition or post-Assad compromise**

The U.S. is now involved in a war of attrition in Syria where only the most dedicated optimist can believe there is a strong enough moderate rebel elements to either take control in the East or defeat Assad. What the U.S. can do, however, is work with its Arab allies as suggested earlier, and ensure that the war of attrition keeps up constant pressure on Assad and Iran, and that there is a clear alternative to Islamist extremism as long as Syria remains divided.

While it is scarcely the most desirable option, the ultimate solution may prove to be some form of "burn out" where the cost to Assad is so high that he will be forced into some form of compromise and where ISIS/ISIL or some other Sunni Islamic extremist faction cannot win. This is grim prospect at best, but it is unclear that it will make the refugee or IDP problem worse and will both give other Arab states leverage and send a clear signal that the U.S. can impose a high cost on even the most limited form of Assad and/or Iranian victory.

The U.S. must also, however, continue to work with the UN, NGOs, and neighboring states to minimize the impact on IDPs, Syrian civilians in combat areas, and refugees. It is all too unlikely that either the Assad regime or the Islamist extremist elements will allow such aid to be effective in many areas, but the U.S. and others must try. At a minimum, the U.S. must work with the wealthier Arab states and other donors to both aid refugees and help stabilize Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey.

- **Focus on a successful P5+1 Negotiation with Iran without setting unrealistic goals for a broader rapprochement, and while actively seeking to contain Iranian influence in Iraq and elsewhere**

Ending the Iranian nuclear threat remains as critical a priority as dealing with the civil wars in Syria and Iran, and is critical to the security of both the Arab Gulf states and Israel. It also remains of critical strategic interest to Russia and China and the U.S. should not view its growing tension with Russia as a reason not to work with both states in seeking to end this threat.

The fact remains, however, that the U.S. still faces a major Iranian challenge in Syria and Iraq, as well as Lebanon. It still faces a growing conventional missile threat to all of its regional allies, and a steadily growing Iranian threat to shipping and petroleum exports in the Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea.

This does not mean the U.S. should abandon the search for a broader rapprochement with Iran, but it does mean that this is likely to take years at best and only come if Iran first reaches a rapprochement with its Arab neighbors. If it does not, Iran is not the prize in the Gulf and its current political structure does not make it a potential friend or ally. Maintaining U.S. forces in the Gulf and Middle East, and building up Arab Gulf capabilities to deter and contain Iran's military forces and use of the Al Quds Force and irregular warfare will remain a critical U.S. strategic priority.

- **Actively respond to new Russian and Chinese activities and strategic challenges**

The U.S. must be very careful not to downplay the increase in Russian activity in the Middle East since the start of the Syrian civil war, the further increase in Russian activity following the crisis in the Ukraine and the Russian focus on the "color revolution" to attack U.S. conduct in the Middle East. It focuses on the fears and concerns of many on the Gulf and the region that the U.S. has been a major force in destabilizing Libya, Syria, and Iraq, and is no longer a trustworthy ally.

China is actively seeking to expand its security interests in the Gulf region as well, along with its commercial and energy presence. Some in the region see it (and India to some extent) as an emerging power that may come to replace the U.S. Moreover, Russia is actively courting China as well as Middle Eastern and other Asian states.

The end result may be more of a spoiler impact than a serious strategic competition, but the same could be said of the original Great Game in Central Asia. Much will also depend on the degree to which the U.S. can reassure its Arab allies and deal with the concerns that Russia and China raise.

- **Work with Israel to ensure its security while continuing visible peace efforts**

The tensions within the Arab world has so far reduced the threat from Syria and Egypt, but have increase the threat from Islamist forces in the Sinai, and seen a steady build-up in the missile and rocket threat in Gaza and from the Hezbollah in Lebanon. This now includes a growing threat from missiles with GPS guidance and a primitive form of "precision strike" capability.

The U.S. will need to continue to help Israel maintain its military "edge" and improve its missile and rocket defenses. At the same time, the failure of the most recent round of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and the other security challenges in the Middle East do not

mean the U.S. should not continue to pursue a two state solution or take the present Arab focus on power struggles within the Arab world for granted.

As the present risk of a “3rd Intifada” shows all too clearly, an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement and a broader formal peace between Israel and the Arab world remains a critical U.S. strategic priority. It is likely to remain a case where the U.S. must give persistence priority over probability, but the U.S. should at least consider making the entire framework it developed during the most recent round of peace talks public, and leaving on the table as a basis for both U.S. diplomacy and as a potential starting point for future talks.

- **Keep U.S. Ties to Egypt while seeking to moderate the Sisi Regime**

The U.S. cannot afford to lose Egypt as an ally that offers overflight rights, transit of the Suez Canal, and secures the Camp David Accords with Israel. It also risks sharply losing its influence if Russia and China replace U.S. arms sales or if the U.S. pushes too hard for reforms in Egypt’s ongoing crackdown on moderate opposition, its media, and use of show trials against the Moslem Brotherhood.

There are no good options in dealing with an Egypt where there is no moderate political structure to build upon and which is caught up in a massive internal political struggle. Some options, however, are clearly worse than others and measures like cutting off military aid seem unlikely to make Sisi and the Egyptian military compromise with the U.S. or take more moderate positions in dealing with the opposition.

The U.S. is likely to be far better off if it uses the country team to push quietly but consistently for Egypt to ease back on its current level of repression and focus on economic stability and the needs of the Egyptian people. It may also find it far better to try to work with states like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE in seeking such goals than act on its own. The Gulf states can see the future risks in Egypt as well as the U.S. can.

Living with Complexity and the “Decade of Least Bad Options”

A strategy of living with problems is never going to be as popular as one of trying to find short-term solutions, but it is likely to prove far more realistic over time. While miracles can happen, they almost never happen to the people whose plans depend upon them. Moreover, while the U.S. may not have to fight a long war against extremism, it almost certainly is going to have to continue to deal with multiple crises in the Middle East for at least the next decade.

The end result is a clear need for strategic patience and realism. It is also for an acceptance of the need to just how unavoidable the complexity and uncertainty of the new Great Game really is, as well as the need for domestic political acceptance that the U.S. must take risks and even the best judged options can and will fail. These are not natural American virtues but they have clearly become necessary ones.