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A Changing Picture with Unaltered Contours. US-Iran Antagonism in the Context of the Iraq-Syria Crisis

by Riccardo Alcaro

ABSTRACT

Such is the magnitude of the crisis in Iraq and Syria that experts have started wondering whether the area will witness a major realignment between the main rival camps, the US and its allies on the one hand and Iran and its proxies on the other. The US and Iran – so the argument goes – share a critical interest in fighting the Islamic State and keep Iraq from total breakdown. Only by joining forces can they bring stability to the region, which incidentally should also serve as an incentive for both parties to reach a compromise on the nuclear issue. This interpretation, however, fails to account for the effects that a US-Iran rapprochement would have on the US's system of alliances in the region. US-Iran relations are likely to remain antagonistic, although the Iraq-Syria crisis and the nuclear issue have indeed the potential to re-orientate them along a less adversarial pattern.

United States | Iran | US-Iran bilateral relations | Iraq | Syria | Islamic State (IS)



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by Riccardo Alcaro*

Introduction

The Middle East is in turmoil. The epicentre of instability is a large area spanning Syria and most of central and northern Iraq. While the rise of the Islamic State (IS) has been the main catalyst for regional and international action, the fight against this most extreme of Sunni Islamist groups unfolds against a wider background of sectarian strife in both Syria and Iraq. Sectarianism, and more specifically the deep rivalry and competition between Sunnis and Shias on the one hand and Sunni extremists and everybody else on the other has progressively become the main fault line around which conflicts for social status, economic benefits and political power are taking place.

The crisis in Syria and Iraq is representative of a juncture where four different trajectories have eventually merged:

1. the ethnic and sectarian divisions that have flared up in Iraq in the wake of the US invasion and occupation of that country between 2003 and 2011;
2. the spread of radical extremist groups that aim to establish territorial sovereignty over significant portions of the region;
3. the savage civil war in Syria, where the Alawite-dominated regime of President Bashar al-Assad faces a large but fractious rebellion spanning secularist and radical Islamist groups alike (including IS itself);
4. and, finally, the underlying rivalry between Iran, Assad's main sponsor and an influential player in Iraq, and the US-centred coalition of Arab countries (plus Israel and Turkey, though Turkey does not see itself as a rival of Iran in all respects), a dynamic that is also on display in the ongoing talks over Iran's nuclear programme.

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The crisis is of historic proportions, as attested to by the number of casualties (several hundreds of thousands), refugees and internally displaced persons (several millions), and the disintegration of once well-established states such as Syria and Iraq, whose common border now only exists on paper. Such is the severity of the crisis that experts and pundits have started wondering whether the area will witness a major realignment of alliances and partnerships. With the caveat that the situation is so volatile that predictions should be taken with a grain of salt, such a realignment is unlikely to take place. The region will remain divided between a US-centred coalition and Iran and its proxies, although US-Iranian relations might in fact end up being less adversarial than they currently are.

1. Prospects for a US-Iranian rapprochement

The US and the Islamic Republic of Iran have a history of antagonism and enmity. A number of experts, however, contend that politics rather than geopolitics is what keeps the two countries apart. According to this school of thought, recent events in the region have given the geopolitical factor such a magnitude that politics should adjust and a new course envisaged.

This “geopolitical factor” is in fact a combination of different elements. First is the diminished capacity of the US to use its military might following the long experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the US military has proven unable to bring about enduring stability. As a result, US public opinion is anything but supportive of further large, open-ended deployments overseas. This diminished ability of the US military to influence events on the ground has increased the appeal of cooperating with regional players.

Of such players, Iran stands out because it has influence on all theatres in which the US and its allies are involved: Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. On all three fronts Iran is in a strategic competition for influence with the US, but in Iraq and Afghanistan neither the US nor Iran see each other as the most urgent threat. They share an enemy in both countries, the Taliban in Afghanistan and IS in Iraq. Prior to the rise of IS (and with the exception of a short-lived period of cooperation in Afghanistan in 2001-2002) the US and Iran quarrelled – often via proxies – on a regular basis in both Iraq and Afghanistan. So, for instance, Iran provided some modest support for select Taliban and other groups in order to keep pressure on the US, while in Iraq it supported the formation of anti-US (and anti-Sunni) Shia militias and strongly backed the Shia-led government of former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki. For a while this policy paid off as US influence in Iraq waned and Iran’s grew. However, the advent of IS has changed the picture because the Islamic Republic is unable to counter it alone (while Iraq’s security forces have crumbled under pressure from IS’s lightning advance). This is the second geopolitical change that might lead to a re-alignment of US and Iranian policies. Elements of this alignment are already visible: Iran has facilitated the stepping down of Maliki in favour of Haydar al-Abadi, who is considerably more forthcoming towards the US than Maliki was; it has

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conducted military operations against IS; it has armed and supported Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga forces (who are also strongly supported by the US); it has benefitted from US air strikes in central-eastern Iraq. The US and Iran are now waging two separate wars against IS, although they are officially not coordinating (but use Iraqi officials as liaisons sometimes).

The third novel element is arguably not of a geopolitical but of a domestic nature: the election of Hassan Rouhani as Iran's president has created an unprecedented possibility for the nuclear file to be successfully addressed through diplomacy. For the proponents of a US-Iran rapprochement the successful conclusion of the nuclear talks is therefore of prominent importance not only on its own merit but also because it could make up the basis of further cooperation on Afghanistan, IS and Iraq. They also believe that a rapprochement between the US and Iran would help bring Syria's civil war to an end, as an Iran that feels less threatened by the US might be more willing to cut off aid to Assad and force him to engage the rebels in negotiations.

2. Prospects for continued US-Iranian antagonism

While there are elements of truth in the above argument, the overall line of reasoning is flawed. The expectation that a nuclear deal would automatically trigger a normalization dynamic in US-Iran relations is misplaced, as Iran and the US remain far apart on a number of issues – ranging from relations with Israel to America's military presence in the Gulf. More important is the failure to factor in the effects that a US-Iran rapprochement would have on the US system of alliances in the region. Antagonism against Iran is one of the main reasons for which countries such as Saudi Arabia remain committed to Washington. A US-Iran rapprochement would be premised on the recognition by the US of Iran's regional role, which the Iranians see as pre-eminent (if not hegemonic), evidently an intolerable proposition in Riyadh and other Arab capitals, not to speak of Israel. For the US this system of alliances is too valuable to be jeopardized. Finally and most importantly, a US-Iran rapprochement would entail the Iranian clerical leadership's getting rid of an anti-Americanism which is part and parcel of the regime's narrative about the legitimacy of the 1979 revolution itself.

In light of this, many experts argue that the US should stick to its traditional alliances and keep Iran under as much pressure as possible. They tolerate the continuation of the nuclear talks but do not see in them any further meaning than ending the threat of a nuclear-capable Iran. They insist that Iran's influence should be checked, most importantly in Syria. Here, they see no other option than opposing Assad with the same resolve shown towards IS, although opinions about the means to do so diverge. Most refrain from calling on the US to send ground troops. But all argue for major steps to empower non-Islamist rebels with the resources to fight against both IS and Assad forces, including by imposing a no fly zone and creating a "safe zone" in northern Syria (ideally including Aleppo, as it is there that some of

the residual secular rebels continue to hold some sway) in which refugees could be welcomed and protected and rebels trained and armed with the goal of fighting both IS and Assad. This policy involves a massive increase in US involvement in Syria's civil war and a much deeper coordination with US allies such as Saudi Arabia (as far as funding and weapon transfers are concerned) and especially Turkey, which would be critical for logistics and direct military assistance. It would also involve the political costs of intervening militarily in a foreign country lacking the legitimacy lent by an authorization by the United Nations Security Council, where veto-wielding China and Russia would certainly oppose any such move.

3. Prospects for a re-calibrated US-Iran rivalry

The argument above seems to be more reflective of reality than the US-Iran rapprochement thesis, yet it is also premised on the assumption that an eventual deal on the nuclear programme and the rise of IS have no impact at all on regional alignments. In fact, the nuclear talks and the problem of IS have the potential to re-orient US-Iran relations, even though not to re-cast them in a cooperative mould.

The two issues unfold along separate tracks. The end result of the negotiation over Iran's controversial nuclear programme is not dependent on US-Iran cooperation against IS in Iraq, nor is the latter conditioned on the former. That said, it would be disingenuous to think of the two issues as wholly compartmentalized.

There is no automatism between a failure to reach a breakthrough in the nuclear talks and an abrupt surge in US-Iran antagonism in the Syria-Iraq context. Much will depend on the steps the US and Iran take following the end of the talks. If Iran promptly resumes sensitive nuclear activities, the US will no doubt try to tighten the noose around Iran's neck by way of harsher sanctions and pressure on allies to follow suit. The deterioration of bilateral relations could then turn the neutral approach adopted by the US and Iran in Iraq into a more competitive one.

But precisely because Iran and the US share an enemy in Iraq and, more importantly, the interest in keeping Iraq united, they would have an incentive to exert restraint. A possibility is that, even in the case of failure in the nuclear talks, Iran might keep a low profile on the nuclear front, resuming only the least controversial of the activities frozen under the interim agreement currently in force. The US and its partners in the P5+1 (the group negotiating with Iran over its nuclear programme, which includes Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia, plus the European Union) could limit retaliation to the re-imposition of the sanctions lifted in the context of the interim agreement. Congress would certainly pass another sanctions law, but the Obama administration could work on the wording so that the law provides the president latitude to waive new sanctions. While the overall bilateral relationship would worsen, the negotiating forum would not so much be dismantled as interrupted, and contacts between the US and Iran would not be discontinued altogether. This would make it still possible for the US and Iran to

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keep their respective policy of a “separate, but parallel war” against IS in Iraq. They could also work towards pressing the Kurds and the Shias towards the creation of a more enduring system of allocation of power in Iraq and re-distribution of oil revenues, as this is a condition for both an eventual victory over IS and the long-term territorial integrity of Iraq.

It is worth underlining that the above scenario would not necessarily be so very different from the one we would have if the nuclear talks were in fact to succeed. A deal would certainly remove a major source of tension, but before reciprocal trust is rebuilt time would have to pass as trust would ultimately be a function of the degree of reciprocal compliance with the deal’s terms. In addition, a concerted solution to the nuclear issue would not change the fact that Iran’s influence in Baghdad would continue to be perceived as being in an inverse relation with the US one: the more influence Iran has, the less the US has, and vice versa.

Thus, the “separate but parallel war” scenario would fit a post-nuclear deal situation too. Over time, however, a nuclear deal would help establish an environment more conducive to selective forms of US-Iran cooperation. Thus, indirectly, a nuclear deal could pave the way for deeper interaction in Iraq.

The final picture would not be in any case that of a new region, as the lines of demarcation between US allies and rivals would not change substantially. What would change is the nature of US-Iran antagonism, which from a stage of deep mistrust and adversarial relations would shift towards an uneasy mix of underlying competition and pragmatic interaction, along a somewhat similar pattern to US relations with China or Russia.

As the case of Russia has shown eloquently, uneasy relationships carry the risk of sliding into open confrontation. At the same time, the history of the recent US-Russian estrangement also attests to the continuing possibility that rivals openly confronting one another on a certain issue (Ukraine) can nonetheless keep cooperating on other issues (ironically, the one instance of US-Russian cooperation that has been unaffected by bilateral tensions is Iran’s nuclear programme).

The Obama administration has already conveyed the message that it is ready to co-exist with the Islamic Republic, meaning that the president is ready to see the clerical regime as a legitimate, although unfriendly, interlocutor. The bet of Rouhani is that Iran’s supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, can be persuaded that antagonism towards the US should be softened whenever this entails greater strategic advantages for Iran. This outcome is plausible, although less likely, even if the nuclear talks fail.

What about Syria’s civil war? Here the US and their allies have a different position from Iran, with the former supporting sections of the anti-Assad rebellion and the latter backing the regime with money, weapons, trainers and troops on the ground – mostly provided by Iran’s proxy Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia armed group. Yet the US and Iran also apparently share the objective of defeating IS in Syria, even if Assad (and consequently its patron Iran) has an interest in keeping the threat of IS

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alive until the other branches of the rebellion – particularly the non-Islamist ones – are irremediably undermined as credible alternatives to the regime itself.

The US is currently conducting air strikes on IS-controlled Syrian territory, but continues to abstain from attacking Assad forces directly (even though it has pledged to train, with help from the Saudis, up to 5,000 “moderate” rebels to fight both IS and the regime). The paradoxical result, critics argue, is that the US war on IS in Syria is actually helping Assad get rid of more troublesome (because internationally more palatable) rebels.

Obama determined long ago that a major involvement in Syria’s civil war carried many more risks for the US than advantages. While his position may have shifted partly after the rise of IS in Syria and Iraq, he has not fundamentally changed his mind concerning the wisdom of committing US forces to ousting Assad. Obama’s priority is to avoid Iraq’s breakdown, not ending Syria’s civil war. His main objective is to degrade and eventually expel IS from Iraq and press Turkey to seal the borders so that the flows of fighters and IS-smuggled oil dry up. Syria would be left bleeding from the continued fight between a weakened IS and an Assad regime increasingly depleted of resources. Since last Summer the administration has also stepped up support for select rebel groups, but it seems apparent that Obama is unwilling to go much farther out of concern that the US would be on the edge of a slippery slope towards another war in the Middle East.

Apart from the costs and the uncertainties of the war effort itself, Obama needs to deal with the problem of what would come after Assad. As of now, no party – neither the regime nor any rebel force – is strong enough to pacify the country and control the territory without foreign military assistance. Even if foreign powers – that is, the US and some of its allies (Turkey first and foremost) – were willing to provide such assistance, the experience of the US occupation of Iraq shows that the most powerful and technologically advanced army of the world is of little use if some sort of social contract is not struck by the main social and political actors of a country.

Speaking of a “social contract” in Syria today may seem far-fetched, but that is what will be needed if a future of a Syria indefinitely divided into two parts controlled by Assad and IS (or three parts, if the US does eventually heed Turkish calls for a safe zone in the north) is to be avoided. A social contract presupposes a process of national reconciliation accompanied by the marginalization of the extremist elements, first and foremost IS. As of now, the regime sees no advantage in national reconciliation, but this could change over time if support from Russia and especially Iran is cut off or made conditional, and this in turn is less attainable by coercion alone on the part of the US and its allies in the region and Europe than by a combination of pressure and diplomacy.

Talk of national reconciliation backed by the US and its allies as well as by Iran may sound, if not implausible, at least premature. But diplomacy should not necessarily aim immediately for the final status. US, European, Turkish, Arab and Iranian efforts

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could coalesce around UN proposals to “freeze” combat in certain areas (starting with Aleppo) and put a brake on the shocking intensity of killings in Syria.

Conclusion

The Middle East is unlikely to undergo a major redrawing of regional alignments. However, the crisis in Syria and Iraq and the negotiation over Iran’s nuclear programme provide a platform for US-Iranian pragmatic engagement which might soften their reciprocal antagonism. The agenda for such pragmatic engagement has three main points: achieving a nuclear deal (or at least avoiding a complete breakdown of the negotiation); promoting a more inclusive government in Iraq while fighting IS; and making an effort to diminish the level of violence in Syria as a first step towards national reconciliation.

US-Iranian pragmatic engagement has the potential to deliver some results in terms of avoiding Iraq’s full disintegration and reducing violence in Syria. What it does not hold, however, is the promise of a long-standing rapprochement between Washington and Tehran and a full stabilization of the Middle East. US and Iranian coordinated efforts may eventually prove to be a decisive factor in reining in the Islamic State in Iraq and reducing violence in Syria, but the region will remain vulnerable to the side-effects of US-Iranian antagonism. Even in the best case scenario – one in which a nuclear deal is reached and complied with – a rapprochement remains a far distant option, dependent on more variables than having the Islamic State as a common enemy. A Middle East gone past the Iraq-Syria crisis will likely present a picture with many novelties but also unaltered contours.

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