

## SMA Reach-back Report

### Evolution of US Foreign Policy in Middle East

**Question R5.4:** *How should United States foreign policy evolve in the region post-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria? What are the dynamics in the region and what will be the implications of this for the USG?*

#### Contributors

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## Executive Summary

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US foreign policy makers struggle to find the right balance in supporting US interests in the Middle East (Abdulla, Bahgat, DeGennaro, Liebl, Maye, Rogers, Serwer, Styszynski). The unbalanced policies, those focusing solely on defense or certain allied interests, while marginalizing diplomacy and development, are diminishing trust in the US and decreasing its influence—challenging US ability to maintain global stability.

Historically, US interventions in the region have caused instability and competition between regional Middle Eastern states leaving many of the weaker parties—Libya, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Yemen, and the Palestinian territories—targets for interference from the Arab Gulf countries, Iran, violent extremists, and those who thrive on internal conflict (DeGennaro). As a result, the region, and more recently the world, has been plagued with ideological radical extremists who have used a perverse form of the religion of Islam to violently project their discontent and anger on populations. Despite US efforts to counter extremist influence and diminish VEO capabilities, the chaotic ungoverned environment allows them to remain or go underground (Liebl, Rogers). Experts agree that the Islamic State, although severely diminished by the Iraqi coalition offensive, will not completely disappear, but only weaken (Abdulla, Cammack, Liebl, Maye, Rogers) and continue to reemerge in the region and abroad. Much of Iraq's potential to survive beyond ISIS will depend on continuing down the stability/democracy building path, one that can hold hope for Syria (Meredith). US engagement with groups that exhibit similar goals/values should be encouraged.

Now that the Islamic State as an organization is damaged, the US should not become complacent (Cammack, Liebl, Maye, Rogers, Styszynski). The US must strategically revise its foreign policy in the region based on desired outcomes and, at the very least, define US interests in the region internally (Meredith). The previous and still ongoing lack of US policy clarity hampers commitment to US actions from stakeholders. Countries and non-state actors, allies, and adversaries alike, are likely to hedge their bets when asked to partner with the US until it becomes clear that they will gain from that partnership, or at the very least not get burned by it; much of this will be defined by the partnership with SDF as a test case for further partnerships in the region (Meredith). The current Administration has not publicly defined its foreign policy in the region or its preferred outcome; therefore, our analysts believe it is necessary to focus on stability (Abdulla, Maye) in the form of free flow of goods (oil among others) and deterring the rise of a hegemonic power in the region, as well as governance legitimacy as a precursor to stability (Meredith). They strongly encourage a broader strategy based on economic and diplomatic influencers keeping in mind not only regional but international stakeholders such as Russia, India, and China (Meredith). The need to partner with groups who develop and mature viable governance capabilities with US support, as compared to the growing divides with regional powers Turkey and Saudi Arabia, should also be emphasized (Meredith).

Looking at the current operational environment, analysts generally agree that the US's main threats are the resurgence of the Islamic State, a weak and ungoverned or poorly governed Iraq and Syria, continued overreach by Saudi Arabia—supporting extremist groups, continued destruction of Yemen, and unwanted interference in Sunni countries under the guise of balancing Iran and the continued use of proxies by so many stakeholders.

Iran has been able to expand its influence more tangibly through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon by assisting the Syrian and Iraqi government against opponents and terrorist groups, which could be an opportunity for the US or a threat depending on how the US decides to engage (experts from Global Cultural Knowledge Network). Two schools of thoughts have emerged with one calling for engagement with Iran while others focus on continuing efforts to restrict Iran's influence in the region. These are historic approaches that should be evaluated more deeply through comparative case study research from the scholarly community.

In the first school of thought, analysts are asking more questions about the existing US relationships with Iran and Saudi Arabia (Bahgat, DeGennaro, Meredith, Rogers). It is not clear to them why the US is so opposed to, at the very least, some engagement with Iran. Iran has extensive economic potential and diversity. Further, Iran holds the largest gas reserves in the world coupled with vast oil assets. This school of thought suggests that perhaps it is time to warm relations considerably with Iran and cool relations with the Gulf States or these proxy battles will ensure there is no end to the conflicts there.

The second school of thought strongly supports continued US and Coalition efforts to restrict Iranian influence in the region while continuing to develop existing relationships with Gulf States (Cammack, Maye, Serwer). In particular, Maye suggests US policymakers “thwart political infiltration from Iranian-leaning militias and religious leaders” in Iraq and Syria. While Cammack does not view Iran influence as a strategic threat to US interests, its negative impact on regional stability suggests that the US use diplomatic efforts and strategic patience to reduce it.

Regardless of approach, analysts believe that the US must be clear about its mission and intentions in the entire region, and assess the tools and levers of influence for better governance and economic progress that can help to reduce the tendency to move toward dangerous ideological movements. With

a weak or ad hoc policy that continues to remain unclear to both US allies, service and coalitions members, adversaries and people in the region, the US is losing its ability to influence, especially in light of growing Russian alternatives to traditional and emerging US partnerships (Meredith).

Before the policy questions are answered it will be difficult for military to do much more than finish the fight to defeat the Islamic State, which will not eliminate it but provide a window for it to continue to dissipate or resurge in a conflict ridden environment.

## Expert Contributions

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R5 #2. What are the risks associated with the security situation in Syria/Iraq outpacing diplomatic progress and policy in the region? What should be done about it?

R5 #4. How should United States foreign policy evolve in the region post-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria? What are the dynamics in the region and what will be the implications of this for the USG?

### Response:

For both questions, I will address the Iraq portion, as it seems interrelated.

A true Middle East expert would know that there is no certainty when it comes to predicting the course of event in the region. I often like to remind myself of this aspect when asked about matters related to Iraq and the region. However, there are current events and indicators at play that suggest several scenarios, none of which could be guaranteed.

First, we would be misled if we thought that defeating ISIS militarily in Iraq, would in fact completely eradicate the ideology of groups like ISIS and al-Qaida from their strongholds. There will always remain a small number of core believers that will try to regroup and recharge by capitalizing on the Iraqi government's weaknesses, corruption, and dysfunctionality. However, a nationwide poll carried out by al-Mustakilla for Research Group back in April 2017 in Iraq, shows that for the first time since 2003, "Sunni Arab public opinion in Iraq is very positive about the political situation in the country, while the Shiite Arab view of politics has grown more negative."<sup>1</sup> 51 percent of Sunni Arabs believed the country is headed in the right direction, while only 36 percent of Shi'a shared the same views. What does this mean and how will it affect the upcoming elections and the Iraqi scene in general? Most of this positive Sunni sentiment could be attributed to the way the Iraqi Forces, particularly, Iraqi Special Forces ISOF and Counter-Terrorism Services ICTS (the "Golden Division"), fought against ISIS in Mosul and other provinces. Moreover, the way ISOF evacuated civilians, offered them aid, food, and medical assistance, while ISIS held them as human shields, left a very positive impression among those civilians. After all, those ISOF officers and soldiers are Iraqis, regardless of their ethnic or sectarian background, a sentiment widely reflected among Iraqis, particularly Sunnis on social media and other communication platforms. Video clips from Mosul showing kids with their families being liberated from ISIS, running towards ISOF officers to hug them and ask for their uniform badges and flags,<sup>2</sup> all of which are indicators of this striking positive shift among Sunnis towards the Iraqi forces and the government in general. What does this mean for the near future in Iraq? It means Sunni Arabs in Iraq, for the first time since 2003, feel the sense of inclusion, despite the hardship they endured living under brutal ISIS' control. After

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/09/14/iraqi-sunnis-are-impressed-by-the-defeat-of-isis-heres-what-that-could-mean/?utm\\_term=.eb7bbc087b5a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/09/14/iraqi-sunnis-are-impressed-by-the-defeat-of-isis-heres-what-that-could-mean/?utm_term=.eb7bbc087b5a)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75ZyFbr4CII>

years of Sunni boycotts and rejections to join the Iraqi forces, we are witnessing a surge among young Sunni men who want to join the armed forces. Commanding general of Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service, Gen. Talib al-Kinani,<sup>3</sup> in an interview with the U.S. based al-Hurra TV said that the ICTS had opened the door for young men to join the service, as the need was for 1000 new recruits only, but ICTS had received 300k applications of young men from all over Iraq to join their ranks. Among those are many Sunnis who saw a role model in the ISOF/ICTS that on one hand ferociously fought ISIS door to door in the old city of Mosul, and on the other hand evacuated civilians and provided humanitarian assistance. Another indicator, from the local level demonstrating the emerging positive view towards the ISOF and its celebrity-like officers, was reflected in the artwork of local young artists that were displayed in several of the recent local festivals.<sup>4</sup> In the "First Reading Festival in Mosul"<sup>5</sup> that took place in eastern Mosul,<sup>6</sup> countless paintings of famous officers that led the offense against ISIS were displayed to the public. Among them were Gen. Abdul Wahab al-Saaidi,<sup>7</sup> known to be a very humble officer, and who is loved by people of Mosul and Iraqis in general.<sup>8,9</sup> The man is known to be of a Shi'a background, but that did not affect his status among local Mosulis. Same goes for Col. Haidar al-Obaidi, another ISOF officer praised and loved by the public in these liberated provinces.

Also, this positive shift in Sunni Arab sentiment will undoubtedly be reflected in the upcoming elections in Iraq in 2018. With a more active role and larger participation, the actual size and voices of Sunni population in Iraq will be reflected in the election's outcome, allowing for a more dynamic representation in the government.

Meanwhile, the negative sentiment expressed by the Shi'a's reflects the majority's dissatisfaction towards the government's performance and its endemic corruption. The average Iraqi Shi'a is in fact suffering lack of services and is living in poverty. Most young Shi'a men left their daily jobs and joined the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) following the fatwa of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to fight ISIS. Whether they were ideologically motivated, already in uniform, or sincerely responding to the call of their homeland facing the danger that is ISIS, black signs mourning those young men killed in the fight against ISIS have been piling in Shi'a-majority provinces. In fact, the largest cemetery in the world, Wadi al-Salam, in the holy city of Najaf, has been receiving tens if not hundreds of coffins carrying the bodies of those young Shi'a men killed in the battlefield since 2014. Pictures of those killed, also known as martyrs by Iraqis, are hung on the poles of street lamps, large billboard and on buildings; and the families of those killed among the PMF often receive no compensation. Although there is no actual fighting in Shi'a-majority provinces, the burden, depression, and exhaustion of this war is clearly felt in these provinces.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BUH094KoA>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-jxNjJlcC8>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/mosul.festival.for.reading/>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.huffpostarabi.com/hares-elabasy/-13261\\_b17942380.html?ncid=engmodushpimg00000003](http://www.huffpostarabi.com/hares-elabasy/-13261_b17942380.html?ncid=engmodushpimg00000003)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.qoraish.com/qoraish/2017/01/%D9%84%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D9%83%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%86-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLj6gDA7Ayc>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.almadapaper.net/ar/news/534789/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%84%D9%82-%D8%A5%D9%84>

It is safe to say that both Shi'a and Sunni Arabs bore the brunt of the ISIS-phase in Iraq and the price was too high for both. People realize that Iraqi politicians are behind what happened; however, if the Iraqi political scene will not offer new faces, then people will either boycott the upcoming elections or just surrender to vote for the same faces. With that being said, more and more Iraqi politicians are representing themselves as secular, non-religious and technocratic individuals. A way of rebranding themselves. One thing that can be noted is that both Shi'a and Sunni Arabs are satisfied with PM Ibadi's policies, charisma, and diplomatic maneuvering. Although the man falls under the prominent Shi'a religious Da'awa party, so far he has distanced himself from his party's objectives and has acted as a professional, secular, and skilled statesman. His openness to Iraq's Arab neighbors such as Saudi Arabia, UAE and Jordan offered him greater legitimacy and respect among both Sunni Arabs and non-ideological Shi'a Arabs. They both view him as a man who has led Iraq to victory against ISIS, following former PM al-Malaiki's disastrous policies that led to ISIS occupation of one third of Iraq.

The Kurdish referendum and its outcome, and whether there will be a Kurdish state separate from Iraq has been a topic of recent wrangling between Iraqi politicians, which had regional and international powers involved. Despite the fact that an independent Kurdistan state could lead to possible conflict particularly on the disputed territories, mainly Kirkuk, those who are monitoring the news out of Iraq, can sense a united front among Shi'a and Sunni Arabs on this regard. This is a stance and an accord that hasn't been witnessed in Iraq since the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. This could have the potential of changing the Iraqi political scene drastically, regardless of whether the Kurds decide to proceed with their independence or stay within Iraq. However, there are several Sunni opposition groups, claiming to represent Sunni Arabs, who have announced their willingness and intentions to, not only support a Kurdish state, but to be included within its territories, that is the "Sunni-majority provinces." This is an indicator that Sunni Arabs are not quite united under one front, whether its tribal, political or religious. Since 2003, the Sunni Arab population in Iraq has always lacked a prominent leadership. No one group, political or tribal personality, can in fact claim to represent all Sunnis. Internal divisions within the Sunni front have always been present; between those who are part of the government, groups opposing the political process (inside and outside Iraq), and those who chose to resort to an insurgency-type of resistance. All this left the average Iraqi Sunni hopeless, frustrated, and vulnerable to the agendas of these competing groups, which eventually led to the ISIS occupation of their towns.

Everything seems to be happening in Iraq at once; the defeating of ISIS in its last strongholds, the Kurdish referendum, and Iraq's openness to its Arab regional neighbors and environment. It is safe to assume that Iraq might witness an Arab-Kurdish conflict, although not as serious as many experts are suggesting. On the other hand, there are many opportunities for the central Iraqi government to capitalize on and the world powers that support it. One of which is the Sunni Arabs warming towards the government and their positive sentiment and satisfaction with the way the government is headed. A vital aspect, that can prevent a resurgence of ISIS-like groups who have always capitalized on Sunni's anger, frustration, distrust, and dissatisfaction for years.

The U.S. government should promote a stable end state, by urging Iraq's political elites to reconcile and integrate groups who participated in the fight against ISIS into government's institutions, both Sunni and Shi'a. Let us not forget that the main triggering point that led most Sunni tribal fighters of the Awakening Councils of al-Anbar aka (Sons of Iraq) from 2006, to go back into joining AQI which later became ISIS, was the failed promises made by al-Maliki's regime to integrate them into government institutions and offer them employment. Another opportunity for the U.S. to promote a stable state is by promoting the rebuilding and reconstruction of the destroyed provinces, mainly the Sunni-majority

provinces that were once held by ISIS and have witnessed the most fighting and destruction. The Iraqi government has yet to compensate those who lost their homes because of the fighting, and most people are still living in either refugee camps or have gone back to live in the ruins of what used to be their homes. An opportunity for the Iraqi government to gain the trust of the Sunni population is by compensating them and allowing them to return to their homes after clearing these neighborhoods.

The international implications of a faltering U.S. diplomatic process would be incalculable but undoubtedly adverse to U.S. interests. A fully engaged Western diplomatic process backed up by a robust military force -- made clear to all that the will to use it is present -- is absolutely required. A diplomatic void will allow the Russian/Iranian axis to establish a permanent presence in Iraq (think the phase of post U.S. withdrawal from Iraq following 2011), and Syria and exercise considerable influence inimical to US interests in the region. The influence of the Iranian special military units and agents in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq is well documented. Their alliance, overt or otherwise, with Russian ambitions is palpable. Meanwhile Assad's war against ISIS is close to success, and he is beholden to Russia and Iran for his survival. The continuance of his regime will also increase tensions with Israel, some Gulf States, and certain segments of the population in Lebanon. Moreover, the defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq has not totally eliminated the threat, and in fact may make it more amorphous and difficult to combat. The largely Sunni extremist movements from al-Qaeda to ISIS have shown remarkable resilience and ability to rise from the ashes, as we've seen over the years. The huge expanse of desert between Iraq and Syria will continue to provide ample territory, hideouts, and possible strongholds for the extremists to operate and grow if not combatted ideologically, as well as in a vigorous counter-insurgency campaign, carried out over a number of years. Meanwhile, the Turks and Iranians, both with hegemonic ambitions in the region, will be rivals aggravated by the Kurdish push for independence. In short, the current power vacuum in the region will be filled by international and regional powers, none of whom can be considered friends of the U.S.

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The defeat of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria raises concerns about what will happen next in these two countries. Will United States get into confrontation with Iran? How stable are our GCC allies? I argue that the United States needs to take a fresh look at the relations with Tehran. The GCC states have not been able to initiate the necessary economic reforms to adjust to persistent low oil prices. Saudi Arabia is likely to face succession crisis in the near future. There is no end in sight for the war in Yemen. The efforts to build a Sunni/Arab coalition to confront Iran are not likely to succeed given the deep-rooted hostility and suspicion between these potential allies.

On the other side of the Persian Gulf, Iran is, relatively, more stable and more democratic than most of its neighbors. True, Iran is not Norway and there are many legitimate reservations and concerns about transparency and human rights. But, since the 1979 revolution Iran has held regular elections. Iranian parliament (Majlis) enjoys some freedom and there are several competing political factions within the regime. The economy is more diversified than most of its neighbors. In the last few decades Iran has developed a sophisticated asymmetrical defense strategy. In any military confrontation, the United States will certainly prevail, but it would be a long and costly one.

United States' and Iran's national interests are not mutually exclusive. In Afghanistan, Iraq, and the war on terror Iran can play a positive role. Less confrontational policy toward Iran should not be seen at the expense of our Arab allies or Israel. We need to develop a mechanism to avoid an accidental naval confrontation in the Persian Gulf. We need to encourage cultural exchange, investment, trade, and track II talks. A less isolated and more incorporated Iran in the regional and global systems is good for the United States.

## Perry Cammack

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In the aftermath of the collapse of the ISIS caliphate in Syria and Iraq, two objectives will be paramount. Preventing the emergence of an ISIS successor capable of waging international jihad, the first and most immediate objective, is achievable through a continued, though limited, U.S. military engagement in both countries. Iranian influence in Iraq and Syria is not, in and of itself, a strategic threat. However, to the extent that such influence is used to support radical non-state actors, threaten regional partners (including Israel), and undermine regional stability, the United States should seek to reduce it through a concerted regional diplomatic effort and strategic patience, while recognizing its severely constrained ability to influence the internal politics in those two countries. Because political circumstances are different in Iraq and Syria, each country will be treated separately.

### IRAQ

**The immediate goal is to prevent the emergence of ISIS successor groups capable of waging international jihad against the United States or U.S. interests. ISIS remnants will survive the caliphate's physical collapse, and likely evolve toward a decentralized network of semi-autonomous cells.** The extent to which ISIS successors threaten U.S. interests will depend significantly on their organization and strategic objectives, and US should tailor its response accordingly. There has been considerable evolution of jihadist objectives. While al-Qaeda prioritized attacks the “far enemy” – the United States – beginning in the 1990s, the Islamic State focused instead on territorial expansion within Iraq and Syria. A decentralized ISIS successor would be more resilient, but would likely have less capacity—and possibly less desire—to execute strategic attacks against Western interests and could possibly prioritize local targets.

**While it is not possible to eliminate Iranian influence in Iraq, fears of Iranian domination are overblown.** Iraq has a strong interest in maintaining cordial relations with Iran, and under almost any conceivable scenario Iran will exert some influence there. But the sense of Iraqi nationalism is tangible among most Shia politicians. Even the stridently anti-American Muqtada al-Sadr has resisted Iranian influence inside Iraq. Overtime, the more confident Baghdad feels of its physical and political security, the less susceptible it will be to Iranian influence.

**The guiding premises for U.S. policy in Iraq should be continued presence and support for Iraqi security institutions.** A limited follow-on U.S. military presence can greatly reduce the three most significant threats facing Iraq: a repeat of the 2014 collapse in Mosul against ISIS, a Lebanon scenario in which the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) gradually supplant the army, and the possibility of a Kurdish-Arab military confrontation. However, given the difficult U.S. history in Iraq, this presence should be modest in numbers, public profile, and mission. The PMF will be the biggest threat to Iraq's sovereignty and are the most important vector for Iranian influence. While there are likely to be concerted efforts by Iranian-supported parties to push for an American withdrawal, the circumstances are more favorable to a continuing American presence under PM Abadi in 2017 than they were under PM Maliki in 2011.

### Policy Recommendations:

1. ***Continue U.S. support for the Iraqi army.*** Iraq's counterterrorism capacities have atrophied since 2011 and are in particular need of support.

2. **Support increased local autonomy in Mosul and other Sunni majority areas.**
3. **Divide and conquer the Popular Mobilization Forces.** Elements of a comprehensive, Iraqi-led approach might include:
  - Incorporating PMF into local security forces in their areas of origin
  - Implementing a DDR campaign which employs former militia members in large-scale reconstruction or infrastructure projects
  - Reducing the ability of militias to compete in elections unless first disarming
4. **Encourage continued Baghdad-KRG dialogue on Kirkuk, disputed internal boundaries, and federalism,** while recognizing that this is a problem to be managed rather than solved.
5. **Encourage Iraq to increase its regional diplomatic efforts.** Continued Iraqi engagement with Arab states could reduce the alienation of Iraqi Sunnis and possibly make Iraq less susceptible to Iranian interference over time.
6. **Keep the US presence in Iraq out of the public eye.** Overt displays of American influence – either political or military – should be avoided to the extent possible.

## SYRIA

**The Syrian terrorism threat cannot be eliminated, but it can be reduced through a continued partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).** Syria will remain fertile ground for jihadi terrorism for the foreseeable future, and the situation in eastern Syria will remain fraught – politically, economically, and otherwise – for the foreseeable future. A political solution to the Syrian civil war would reduce geopolitical tensions and undermine local support for extremist organizations, but does not appear forthcoming. U.S. support for the Kurdish-led SDF creates serious complications in US-Turkish relations and exacerbates Arab-Kurdish tensions. However, the U.S. has at present no practical alternatives to continued partnership with the SDF. A physical, though limited, U.S. presence can reduce the scope for Turkish-Kurdish conflict in Syria and deter, at least in part, regime encroachment in east of the Euphrates.

**Iranian influence in Syria will remain significant for the foreseeable future.** Economic sanctions – which were instrumental in achieving the JCPOA – are unlikely to have the same impact in Syria and the U.S. will not be able to rally a similar global coalition. Meanwhile, decades of US sanctions against Hezbollah have not fundamentally slowed its military and political ascendancy in Lebanon. Israel is likely to pursue a more aggressive posture against Iran and Hezbollah. To a limited degree, this should be tolerated through close political and security consultation with Israel. However, Israel needs to be urged to take care to avoid war with Hezbollah, which could conceivably lead to armed conflict between the U.S. and Iran, and which would have highly negative consequences for US and the region. Diplomatic engagement with Moscow should highlight the risk that Russia faces in the south in the event of renewed conflict between Israel and Hezbollah.

**Although short-term U.S. options for challenging Iran are limited, it may be possible to somewhat mitigate the impact of Iranian influence, over time.** Having consolidated control over much of Western Syria, the Assad regime – which remains secular in orientation – may seek to establish a degree of independence from Iran, as it has already done with Russia. Furthermore, unlike in Lebanon, there are not natural domestic political constituencies for Shia militants in Syria. Iranian and Russian financial support is unlikely to be adequate for large-scale reconstruction efforts in Syria. The support of international financial institutions, Western and Arab governments will eventually be necessary, giving the US meaningful financial leverage. The U.S. should use this leverage to continue to push for a political settlement for the Syrian civil war.

**Policy Recommendations:**

1. ***Maintain relationship with the SDF.*** The partnership provides a platform for continued CT operations in eastern Syria.
2. ***Work to promote international consensus on Syrian reconstruction.*** Although Europe may be keen to begin reconstruction (to reduce flow of refugees), international support of reconstruction should be made conditional and a political settlement and seek to box out Iranian-supported militias, to the extent possible.
3. ***Support decentralization to empower local political actors.***
4. ***Coordinate closely with Israel.*** However, care should be taken to avoid another Israeli conflict with Hezbollah.
5. ***Increase engagement with Lebanon.*** International pressure against Hezbollah is likely to grow in the coming months, so increased U.S. engagement could reduce the scope for instability or political violence in Lebanon.
6. ***Prioritize support for border security and intelligence cooperation in neighboring countries.*** There is likely to be a terrorist threat emanating from Syria for some time, so continued efforts to bolster countries like Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq will be required.

## Global Cultural Knowledge Network

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Contribution from a number of anonymized GCKN experts:

Define US interests in the region, at least internally. Why are we opposed to Iran? What do we want in Mesopotamia or the Arabian Peninsula or the Levant? The answers to these questions are unclear to both US service members and to people in the region. This lack of clarity hampers commitment to US actions. Countries and non-state actors are hedging their bets when asked to partner with the US, because it is unclear to what end.

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US leaders may have to hold senior-level discussions to define their mutual objectives in the Mediterranean region and assess their tools and levers of influence. A promising format for these discussions might be to come together to adopt the strong sanctions regime that ultimately brought Iran to the negotiating table – a diplomatic feat that required extensive diplomacy to convince all parties not to cave in to their individual interests for conducting business with Iran.

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Books are written to answer this question. Either unite more fully with the Gulf states or warm relations considerably with Iran and chill relations with the Gulf states.

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### **Response:**

This is a multipart question<sup>1</sup>, where the first issue that must be addressed is the use of the phrase “post-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria”. To do so, one needs to examine a variety of factors, starting with, how long has the Islamic State been in existence already and has it already suffered through any previous similar disastrous phases. However, even before that it needs to be established, is the Islamic State, by whatever name they now call themselves or did so in the recent past, is it a unique event/movement? Is it truly a radical departure from Islam, is it a new and different innovation in Islam? Well, no, it really isn’t new and unique. The Islamic State (or if you prefer, the *Jamā’at al-Tawḥīd wa-al-Jihād*<sup>2</sup> or the *Tanzīm Qā’idat al-Jihād fī Bilād al-Rāfidayn*<sup>3</sup> or the *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Iraq*<sup>4</sup>, or possibly Al Qaeda in Iraq), is not new, rather it is a cyclical and episodic event within Islam in which movements arise in order to revive the “original” Islam, seeking to achieve this by cleansing Islam of *bi’dah*<sup>5</sup> and *shirk*<sup>6</sup> and return it to what Muhammad passed on what Allah intended.

So, with a starting point of 632 AD, the death of Muhammad, the rise of Shi’a Islam could be considered the first revivalist movement, which is why Shi’a are often referred to by Sunni revivalists as *rafidi* or *rafidah* (rejecters). Certainly the rise of the Khawarij and their ferocious repudiation of innovations by the early Sunni Umayyad Caliphate and all succeeding Caliphates until they were mostly exterminated<sup>7</sup>. Next in line would be the Almoravids, Berbers who brought a cleansing of western North Africa and much of Muslim Spain<sup>8</sup>. They were dispossessed by the Almohads, who accused the Almoravids of

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the New York Times has been exploring this same question. See Ben Hubbard and Eric Schmitt, “ISIS, Despite Heavy Losses, Still Inspires Global Attacks, NY Times, 8 July 2017; and Antony J. Blinken, “The Islamic State Is Not Dead Yet”, NY Times, 9 July 2017.

<sup>2</sup> *Jamā’at al-Tawḥīd wa-al-Jihād*, “The Organization of Monotheism and Jihad” (JTJ).

<sup>3</sup> *Tanzīm Qā’idat al-Jihād fī Bilād al-Rāfidayn*, “The Organization of Jihad’s Base in the Country of the Two Rivers” (TQJBR).

<sup>4</sup> *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Iraq*, “the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

<sup>5</sup> *Bi’dah*, meaning innovation in religious matters. Literally anything changed, added or deleted from the original revelations, sayings and practices of Muhammad can, and often has been, considered *bi’dah*. Thus revivalists seeking to purify Islam always have plenty of ammunition as it is a human practice to change, modify and accommodate anything and everything.

<sup>6</sup> *Shirk* is the sin of practicing idolatry or polytheism, i.e. the deification or worship of anyone or anything besides the singular God, i.e. Allah. Therefore, any distraction can be labelled *shirk*, such as sports, democracy, communism, socialism, environmentalism, literally anything that inhibits the complete submission to Allah.

<sup>7</sup> The Khawarij reputedly arose within 20 years of the death of Muhammad, and contested many of the changes and accommodations made by the first four Caliphs (Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali), often using assassination as a tool. There were several branches of Khawarij, to include the most extreme revivalist, the Azraqa, the somewhat less extreme Najdat, and a more quietist group called the Ibadi, who ultimately are the only survivors of this branch of Islam as they isolated themselves in the then almost unreachable Oman. The Khawarij movement was basically stamped out after the Khawarijite Rebellion of 866-896 AD, the last remnants (excepting the Ibadi) stamped out by 950 AD.

<sup>8</sup> The Almoravids, or in Arabic the *al-Murabitun* (those dwelling in the frontier garrisons), were a confederation of Berber tribes whose religious revivalist zeal built them an empire in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. In their northward drive, they conquered a majority of the Taifa (independent Muslim emirates, or principalities) who had replaced the Caliphate of Cordoba when it collapsed in 1031, accusing those *tawa’if* of religious laxness.

religious laxness. Unlike the Almoravids, the Almohads attacked the Christian and Jewish dhimmis of Al Andalus, either forcing them to convert, killing them or causing them to flee.

However, it was the contributions of Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyyah (1268-1328) which set in stone the traditionalist Hanbali madhhab<sup>9</sup> formulated from the teachings of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (780-855), who lived through the Khawarijite rebellion. Ibn Taymiyyah based his teachings, as a religious scholar and political activist, on the actions of the oath of the companions (sahaba) to Muhammad as follows; "to obey within obedience to God, even if the one giving the order is unjust; to abstain from disputing the authority of those who exert it; and to speak out the truth, or take up its cause without fear in respect of God, of blame from anyone. There was no allowance for bid'ah, which he considered a condition of apostasy from the one true faith, and thus subject to death.

Moving forward<sup>10</sup>, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1793) built upon the teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah and created the Muwahhidun (Unitarians) movement in 1744, when he allied himself with the Saud clan. Called the Wahhabi by outsiders, this movement has been variously described as reformist, fundamentalist, austere or puritanical. They called themselves Muslims, and viewed most others as, if Muslim, al-Dawlah al-Kufriyyah (heretics), munafiqun (hypocrites) or as apostates. The Shi'a clearly were apostates in their eyes and were labeled rafidi/rafidah. All others, as non-Muslims, were simply Kufr (infidels). The Wahhabis believed that it was their mission to cleanse Islam of all the innovations and wickedness, and they did so with incredible brutality. Ultimately the first Wahhabi/Saud state, established in 1744, was crushed by the Egyptian Ottomans in 1818. A second state (1824-1891) was crushed by the Ottoman Turks themselves, amply aided by the Sunni Arab Shammar tribe of the Rashidi Emirate. The third Wahhabi/Saud state was established in 1921 on the ruins of the Rashidi Emirate, and is still in existence today.

From the Muwahhidun movement of Muhammad Wahhab sprang the Deobandi Movement of South Asia, based on the teachings of Shah Waliullah, who had been a student of Muhammad Wahhab in Mecca. This revivalist movement had two aims, the resurrection of Islamic primacy in India and to combat the increasing British penetration and cooption of the Indian Princely States by the British. The British had great trouble with the Deobandi, naming them Wahabees. The Deobandi, like the Muwahhidun, are still a going concern today, providing the core Islamic foundation for the Afghan Taliban of today<sup>11</sup>. Another South Asian revivalist movement is the Ahl-e Hadith movement, originating in Kashmir and heavily influenced by the Deobandi at first. They are still in existence today in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, with a noted Islamic terrorist group derived from their teachings, the Lashkar-e Taiba.

There are two other Islamic revivalist movements which need to be noted, that would be the Muslim Brothers (al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn), established in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna in Egypt as a transnational Sunni group. The Muslim Brothers, generally referred to as the Muslim Brotherhood, is the basis for

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<sup>9</sup> A madhhab (way to act) is a school of thought within fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). The current madhhab of Sunni Islam are Sahfi, Malki, Hanbali and Hanafi. For Shi'a, it is Jafari and Zaidi.

<sup>10</sup> Between Ibn Taymiyya and the rise of the Wahhabi, there was a Sufi revivalist movement in South Asia, called the Naqshbandi. This heavily influenced the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, who rejected the pluralism of his father and tried to establish a fundamentalist Islam as the ruling order of Hindu India. Ruling for nearly 50 years, he gravely weakened the Mughal Empire, leaving it susceptible to the rising Marathas, the Durrani Afghan jihadists, and ultimately, European penetration of South Asia.

<sup>11</sup> Lashkar-e Jhangvi, a virulently anti-Shia Pakistan terror organization, has firm Deobandi religious foundations.

such groups as Al Qaeda<sup>12</sup>. The second movement is based in South Asia, the Jamaat-e Islami (Assembly of Islam), established in 1941 by Abul ala Maududi, who led the movement until his death in 1979. It advocates transforming Pakistan fully into an Islamic state governed by Sharia. Jamaat-e Islami strongly opposes capitalism, communism, liberalism, socialism and secularism as well as economic practices such as offering bank interest (considered usury), all in line with the concept of shirk<sup>13</sup>.

So, with all the above evidence of numerous Islamic revivalist movements, many frequently violent at different periods of time, and many still in existence today (often working with each other for the furtherance of their goals), it is somewhat premature to talk about a post-Islamic State period.<sup>14</sup>

There are some further qualifiers as well, such as the Islamic State of Iraq, lineal predecessor of the Islamic State of today. In 2006 it declared the establishment of a caliphate in Fallujah and Ramadi, which was fairly swiftly crushed by the U.S. and its Coalition allies, including some Iraqi forces. The survivors fled the urban battlefields and returned to their rural strongholds, ultimately rebuilding for a second run in 2013-2014. This initial declaration of a Caliphate in 2006 is the same Caliphate struggling to retain its physical space today in September 2017. Leaders within the current Caliphate have told the world via media that even if they are driven from the cities again, they will go back to their rural strongholds and ultimately return to drive out the apostate regimes. What makes this ironic is that the United States and its western allies focus on the key terrain, the urban areas, assuming that conquest (destruction) of them indicates pacification and victory. The very fact that Al Qaeda, a kindred if not as violent traveler, has been “defeated” multiple times yet still remains and is again gathering strength, should give U.S. political and military planners pause.

And the Islamic State, unlike almost all of its predecessors I have listed, is unique in some ways. It is not in its violence and what we would term bent towards atrocities, rather it is its use of technology to assist in its revivalist drive to create a “pure” Islamic state. It has explored the vast cyber domain, planting a firm foothold there and in essence, creating a “sacred” cyber refuge. It is at least a generation ahead of its main Islamic revivalist competitor, Al Qaeda, because Al Qaeda leaders are of an older generation and are not fully comfortable with cyber tools and opportunities (AQ leadership by and large prefers human messengers, not trusting technology). Within a minimal physical footprint, one which can be distributed and compartmentalized, it is almost impossible to see how those opposed to the Islamic State can remove its presence from the Cyber sphere<sup>15</sup>. It is far too easy for the Islamic State to continue to attract new recruits, both locally and internationally, via the Internet by appealing to the revivalist impulse of sacrifice, apocalypse, salvation and Utopia. This is the story of the Mahdi, al-Dajjal and Isa the Redeemer; which is all about Islamic eschatology<sup>16</sup>. That is, by the way, the religious basis of the Islamic State.

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<sup>12</sup> Some additional groups are HAMAS, Al Shabaab, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Takfir wal-Hijra, the Haqqani Network, and so on and so forth.

<sup>13</sup> For a further look into some aspects of Jamaat-e Islami, see: Shireen Khan Burki, “The Tablighi Jama’at: Proselytizing Missionaries or Trojan Horse?” *Journal of Applied Security Research*, Vol 8, Iss 1, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> For further reading on this topic, see: Ira M. Lapidus, “Islamic Revival and Modernity: The Contemporary Movements and the Historical Paradigms”. *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol 46, No. 4, pgs 444-460; Brill 1997, Leiden, NE. Or: Michael Cook, “The Koran, a very short Introduction, pg 43, Oxford University Press, UK, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> See: Kenza Berrada and Marie Boudier, “Can ISIS’s Cyber-Strategy really be thwarted?”, ESSEC Business School, January 2017, France.

<sup>16</sup> Eschatology is the part of theology concerned with death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind.

Even if the Islamic State is physically destroyed in Iraq, and ultimately in Syria, will it truly be eradicated? There is a current example close at hand to study, the Islamic State in Libya. Centered around Sirte early on, by 2016 the Islamic State had been deprived of its enclave and the remnants forced into a “twilight” existence. So, they rebranded themselves, dispersed and worked very hard to establish numerous sleeper cells, all of this successfully. What this strategy has enabled is the survival of Islamic State elements in Libya, while providing incentives for “shock and awe” attacks (for example, the Manchester attack in the UK, 22 May 2017) as well as extremely well prepared “pin point” guerilla attacks in Libya<sup>17</sup>. This is easily transposed into Syria and Iraq (Suraqiya). And the strategy in Libya nicely compliments the cyber eschatological strategy.

And what if the Islamic State is not destroyed totally? What if sheer exhaustion combined with a lack of adequate military power leaves a mini-Islamic State along the Syria reaches of the Euphrates River Valley, an entity placed under embargo and basically besieged, not considered worth the cost in blood and treasure to eradicate? Does it wither away? Well, the widespread and continuing attacks by Islamic State stay-behind elements, sleeper cells and new recruits in Iraq which have been officially cleared of such elements may give an indication. There has been extensive Islamic State infiltration back into Diyala and Anbar provinces. Fallujah, Tikrit and Ramadi have seen a recrudescence of Islamic State presence<sup>18</sup>, much of which is ignored because the Iraqi police forces have not been rebuilt due to a lack of funds and manpower<sup>19</sup>.

Alright, so maybe not a post-Islamic State environment completely but one in which the Islamic State threat is greatly eroded. Well, this still leaves Al Qaeda, currently prominently represented within Syria around Idlib by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and to a much lesser extent, by Ahrar al-Sham (yes, despite its forceful denials, it too is an Al Qaeda franchisee; seems Al Qaeda is papering its bets on multiple players in Suraqiya). While they are different, both are Islamic revivalist entities. Each has a long-term end goal of a global Wahhabi Sunni Caliphate, it is just the strategy to get there is the difference (one worth killing for, apparently). Al Qaeda works to shape the global terrain by sacred terror attacks, working to create numerous AQ franchises and proto-Emirates. Ultimately, Allah will decide the time is nigh and will unify these entities into the global Caliphate (remember, eschatology!). So the time frame for this effort is forever, as it will be Allah who decides. Could be tomorrow, could be 10,000 years from now. So the fight goes on, endlessly. The Islamic State, on the other hand, believes that it is now that the fight needs to be fought, that Allah is with them and they need to destroy all their enemies in order to establish that global Wahhabi Sunni Caliphate. They may not succeed at first, and there may be several early defeats but Allah will ultimately see them to victory. So potentially, the Islamic State may be with us for a long time as well<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> See: Jason Pack, Rhiannon Smith and Karim Mezran, “The Origins and Evolution of ISIS in Libya”, Atlantic Council Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, June 2017, Chapter IX, pages 40-42, Washington DC.

<sup>18</sup> See: Daniel Milton and Muhammad al-Ubaydi, “The Fight Goes On: the Islamic State’s Continuing Military Efforts in Liberated Cities”, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, June 2017, NY.

<sup>19</sup> Much local security has by default landed in the hands of Popular Mobilization Units/Forces (PMUs/PMFs), also called Hashd forces. The great bulk of Hashd forces directed by the Iraq Ministry of Interior are Hashd al-Shaabi, meaning Shia. Having Shia PMUs providing law enforcement in devastated Sunni areas has already seen numerous incidents and a shifting back to some pro-Islamic State feeling and activity. If the Shia PMUs are supported by Iran, the relations are usually much worse (for the Islamic State, Iran was and is a central evil in the cleansing of the Islamic world).

<sup>20</sup> See: Aaron Zelin, “The War between ISIS and Al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement,” Research Notes #20, June 2014, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, DC.

However, completely aside from all of the above, the United States has several other issues which either do or may very soon have a dramatic impact on the crafting of U.S. foreign policy in the region. Yet once again, before starting, a question needs to be asked. What are the vital U.S. strategic interests in Iraq and Syria, either together or separately? In early July, President Trump ended the CIA program authorized in 2013 by then-President Obama, to arm selected Syrian rebels. Many in Washington and elsewhere view this as President Trump believing that the cost versus benefit to the U.S. is not worth it, and that the ending of the program is a signal that Russia has won over Syria<sup>21</sup>. Not a popular political decision, it does have fairly widespread U.S. popular support, as most Americans do not understand why the U.S. is in Syria and why is the U.S. increasing its military commitment in Iraq. So, some hard decisions need to be explored and made.

Impacting the examination and future decisions, the first question might be, how much oil does the U.S. import from Iraq (as the U.S. imports none at all from Syria)? Currently, it is less than 20 million barrels a year. This may sound like a lot, but the U.S. imports from Canada alone 2.2 million barrels a day (that's over 800 million barrels a year from our northern neighbor a year!). So, clearly for the U.S., oil is not a vital strategic national interest. Therefore, the U.S. must be there to support the flow of oil to our Non-Middle East allies. Of course, then the question arises in which it can be asked that maybe they should contribute more troops. That is far beyond the purview of this examination as it is in the nature of political decisions, not military<sup>22</sup>.

Moving on, support for a democratic Iraq (since apparently Syria is lost to the Russians, and the Iranians, and Hezbollah) is a possibility. However, even though the U.S. participated in the creation of the current power-sharing structure of the Iraqi government, to including aiding in the creation of the Iraqi Constitution, the Iraqis would like to reform the government into a more merit-based one, dumping the power-sharing arrangements like getting rid of three Vice presidents and doing away with numerous political perks. Essentially, from an Iraqi Sunni perspective, this entails a permanent Shia-ization of the Baghdad-based government. Which creates Sunni Arab sympathy for either the Islamic State, or a similar follow-on entity, in order for Sunnis to govern themselves correctly in accordance with their faith. And it has created a push for the Iraqi Kurds to take the autonomy granted to them by Article 53(A) under the "Law of Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period", dated 8 March 2004 and further reinforced by the Constitution of 2005<sup>23</sup>, and now openly agitate for independence. The President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Massoud Barzani, has set 25 September

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<sup>21</sup> See: Natasha Bertrand, "'Putin won in Syria': Trump is reportedly ending the CIA's covert program to arm Syrian rebels", [www.BusinessInsider.com](http://www.BusinessInsider.com), 19 July 2017; accessed 17 Sep 2017.

<sup>22</sup> What it does bring up is the criticality of long-term U.S. foreign policy focusing on stability (often appearing it is stability for the sake of stability, which brings to mind the Second Law of Thermodynamics and entropy).

<sup>23</sup> The Kurds continue to ignore Article 140 in the 2005 Constitution, which states: "The responsibility placed upon the executive branch of the Iraqi Transitional Government stipulated in Article 58 of the Transitional Administrative Law shall extend and continue to the executive authority elected in accordance with this Constitution, provided that it accomplishes completely (normalization and census) and concludes with a referendum in Kirkuk and other disputed territories to determine the will of their citizens), by a date not to exceed the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2007." The Kurds have refused to hold the referendum as Baghdad has pressed for it. In 2014, with the collapse of Iraqi Security forces, most fleeing south, Mosul was lost and the Kurds, reinforced by thousands of Kurdish soldiers who had deserted from the Iraqi Army, occupied most of Kirkuk, Ninewa and parts of Diyala provinces, bring almost a million Kurds under their protection (and control). The Kurds claim the vote has now happened, as the Iraqi military of Baghdad voted with their feet, abandoning those Kurds (and Turkmen, Assyrians, Yezidi and Arabs) to the Islamic State.

2017 as the date for a binding vote for independence of the KRG, taking them out of Iraq and becoming a new nation. In January 2005, the Kurds held a non-binding referendum on the question of Kurdish independence, with just over 2 million votes it passed by 98.98 per cent. It is expected that this vote will pass with a similar margin, and that almost all Turkmen and Arabs within the KRG will boycott the vote, just as they did twelve years ago.

If the vote is held (it was originally scheduled for 2014 but was deferred by the Islamic State assaults), and the Kurds in northern Iraq declare independence, the potential consequences could be disastrous. There has not been an independent Kurdish political state in the over 3,000 years of Kurdish history in the Middle East. They have always been subject to someone(s), with the best being a local autonomy but always divided by stronger powers. If the referendum is held and the vote is for independence, then there is no other way that Baghdad can consider it as other than secession and war.

The KRG is currently governed by the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), which has the majority within the 111-seat parliament. The leader of the KDP is Massoud Barzani, who has been president since June 2005. His main political rival is Jalal Talabani, who is head of the minority Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Each political party is dominated by the respective clans of each man, so to be KDP is to be a Barzani supporter, while to be PUK is to be a Talabani supporter. The KDP dominates in the center and west of the KRG, as well as the capital city of Irbil. The PUK dominates the eastern part of the KRG, centered on the other major Kurdish city of Sulamaniyah (Slemani). In order to secure the eastern end of the KRG to Ceyhan, Turkey pipeline, which is the economic lifeline of the KRG and is allowing its bid for independence, the KDP invited in the Turks, who have stationed a reinforced Commando Brigade in western KRG. Not only does this Turkish military presence in what is still northern Iraq secure the oil facilities, it discourages any military movement by Baghdad as well as splits the traditional enemies of the Turks, the Kurds (the KRG Kurds are now politically separated from the Kurds of Turkey and Syria, which does not stop them, especially the Kurds of Turkey, from using the KRG as an insurgent base). As an internal political consequence within the KRG, the PUK has invited in an Iranian military presence into eastern KRG, however it is one not as obvious as an entire commando brigade.

In addition, there is a significant U.S. presence in the KRG, which is considered by the U.S. as the most secure and safe area in the region. From 2003 to 2011, when major U.S. combat forces were engaged in combat in Iraq, no American died from hostile causes in Kurdish secured areas. The Kurds very much like and appreciate Americans, which allows the U.S. to minimize its security presence in the KRG while simultaneously using it as a regional lily-pad to stage U.S. forces and logistical support from there to elsewhere, such as northern Syria. A bid for Kurdish independence from Iraq puts the U.S. in a horrible dilemma, even though the U.S. has clearly stated to the KRG that the referendum should not occur and that the Kurds must stay with the central Baghdad government and remain as an autonomous entity. Does the U.S. continue to support the Kurds if the move is made for independence, in order to maintain a secure presence in the larger region as well as to continue U.S. operations in Syria? Or, does the U.S. honor its commitment to a unitary centralized Iraqi government and withdraw from the Kurdish enclave and relocate to much less secure bases in Arab Iraq?

Turkey, which has encouraged the economic autonomy of the KRG as a means to split the Kurds, is not in favor of outright independence, seeing it as a potential means to reunify all the Kurds (to the harm of Turkey). Turkey is currently heavily engaged against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)<sup>24</sup>, whose military arm is People's Defence Forces (HPG) and YJA-STAR (Free Women's Units). The PKK military forces use

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<sup>24</sup> "One who confronts death" in Kurdish.

the Qandil Mountains of northern KRG as a cross-border insurgent refuge, which invites periodic Turkish Air Force attacks into northern Iraq. The U.S. support to the northern Syrian Kurds of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), is not at all favorable looked upon by Turkey, which views the PYD is an arm of the PKK (which in many ways it is). That U.S. support, as stated above, is staged via the KRG in Iraq and is continuing despite the hostility it is engendering between Turkey and the U.S., who are NATO allies.

Other factors concerning the KRG is the pervasive corruption and extremely divisive politics there. As an example, the military force of the KRG is called the Peshmerga and is believed to have 36 brigades, of which very few are actually carried at full strength, most being composed of small cadres with the purpose to mobilize in time of emergency by reservists. Foreign aid funds many of these units as if they were at full strength, yet most of the units are filled with what is termed “ghost soldiers”. And remaining with the Peshmerga brigades, political patronage dictates disposal of the excess funds. The KDP supposedly controls twelve brigades, of which three are fully or mostly manned<sup>25</sup>. On the other hand, the PUK supposedly controls fourteen or fifteen brigades<sup>26</sup>, which if the count is correct, leaves several additional brigades up for grabs over political loyalties. Despite the overwhelming popularity of Americans in the KRG (there is no known incident of a U.S. soldier being killed by hostile action in Kurdish secured areas of Iraq from 2003 to 2011), all of the above factors severely impact or will impact the ability of the U.S. to remain physically in the KRG or to retain the close and friendly relationship currently enjoyed between the Kurds of Iraq and the U.S. A last note, the 2012 discovery of oil below Mt Sinjar (the Shengal Mountains) in supposed vast quantities has brought to prominence a formerly largely ignored area (home of the Yezidi), making it an economic prize desired by the Kurds.

Before reviewing the situation with the non-Iraqi Kurds, the situation with the Baghdad government needs to be quickly reviewed. The current government, led by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, has somewhat distanced itself from the close relationship the previous Prime Minister (Nuri al-Maliki) had with Iran. Parliamentary elections are slated to be held in April 2018, in which the former PM intends to try and reclaim the Prime Minister-ship. This is not something looked forward to by many Iraqis, especially non-Shia Iraqis. In addition, Muqtada al-Sadr, a Shia cleric who enjoys extensive support among poor and/or dispossessed Shia, largely around Baghdad, has threatened to use his influence to boycott the elections and since August 2016 has largely brought the political process to a stand-still in Iraq. This political stand-off has not only increased the already extensive corruption within the Iraqi political system but has crippled the ability to restore destroyed/damaged areas of Iraq as well as the rebuilding of a civil police infrastructure. This has left much of the areas in which fighting occurred dependent on increasingly weary international donors for relief and rebuilding, while security has been given over to PMU/PMFs, mostly Shia and many sponsored and supported by Iran<sup>27</sup>. Bottom line, the internal political and security situation in Iraq is not likely to improve for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>25</sup> A few of the brigades loyal to the KDP are the “Hezakani Gulan” (Gulan Force – an elite unit tasked to defend the President and the Presidential Compound) and the “Hezekani Barzan” (Barzan Forces) another brigade formation, consisting of men recruited from the president’s own clan.

<sup>26</sup> Such as the “Dizha Tiror” (Counterterrorism Group) an elite anti-terror unit, the “Hezakani Asaishi Yaketi” (Security Force for PUK leader) and the “Hezekani Kosrat Rasul”, (KRG VP Protection Force – tasked with defending the Vice-president, who is a member of the PUK).

<sup>27</sup> The PMUs fall into several categories, a few examples: Hashd al-Sha’abi (Shi’a units nominally under the control of the Iraq Ministry of Interior - Kataib Hezbollah (Iranian supported), Asaib Ahl al-Haq (Iranian supported), Saraya Khurasani (Iranian supported), Ashura Brigades (Sistani sponsored), Al-Risali Brigades (Sistani sponsored), Liwa Ali al-Akbar (Sistani sponsored), Saraya al-Salam (Sadr sponsored), Kataib al-Tayyar al-Risali (formerly Sadrist now Iranian supported)

Hashd al-Asha’ri: Sunni tribal militias nominally under the control of the National Security Agency (MOI); as an example, “The Lions of Ninevah”

Iran is currently extremely active in both Iraq and Syria, and is a factor in the Kurdish areas. Iran is largely supporting the Damascus regime of Bashir al-Asad, ably assisted by Hezbollah, Russia and Shi'a fellow-travelers formed into PMU/PMFs from such diverse areas as Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen<sup>28</sup>. Iranian security forces are active against the Kurdish groups PJAK (Party of Free Life of Kurdistan, its military arm is the YRK - "East Kurdistan Defense Units) and KDP-I (Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, its military arm is the Peshmerga [not KDP/PUK Peshmerga]). Iranian artillery bombardment of PJAK insurgent camps in eastern KRG is a frequent occurrence lately. Iranian control of extensive areas of north and northwestern Iraq is suspected, as the majority of Iraqi PMU/PMFs operating in those regions are Iranian-supported. Iran has worked very hard with its Iraqi proxies to convert those Hashd forces into something akin to the Iranian Basij<sup>29</sup>, which appears to be close to fruition as those units are increasingly not expected to dissolve and turn security over to reorganized Iraqi MOI police forces (which do not yet exist).

Turkey, a NATO ally, is extremely dissatisfied with the situation in Syria, and less so in Iraq since the Baghdad government forces retook Tal Afar, freezing out Iranian-supported Iraqi PMUs from taking the largely Turkmen-occupied city. In Syria, the creation of the autonomous (at this time) Kurdish political entity called the PYD (the Democratic Union Party whose military arm is the YPG (People's Protection Units), the YPJ (Women's Protection Units) and the affiliated YBS (Sinjar Resistance Units – an associated Yezidi force). The PYD has been named Rojava by the Kurds of Syria, meaning "Western" in Kurmanji Kurdish. The Syrian Kurdish intent is to form a single geographic political entity which will be made ethnically Kurdish (ethnic cleansing and Kurdish homogeneity is considered a necessity for Kurdish independence). Turkey intervened (see invade) in northern Syria in August 2016, initially around Jarabulus in the Euphrates River valley and has since created a Turkish-controlled enclave called the Euphrates Shield. Roughly the size of Delaware, it is occupied by around 6,000 Turkish troops and their

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There are also minority Hashd units, such as: Iraqi Turkmen Front – in existence since 1995 but not allowed militia units by either Baghdad gov't or, later KRG; Turkey then provided arms and training, militia now ~4,000; Turkmen Brigades (not affiliated with ITF), formed into 16<sup>th</sup> Bde (almost all Shia), 52<sup>nd</sup> Bde, 92<sup>nd</sup> Bde and Bde of Imam Hussein (all Shia) (most supported by KRG)

Yezidi: Sinjar Resistance Unit (YBS, formed in 2007 and supported by Kurds), Protection Force of Edzikhan (HPE, formed in 2015 in response to ISIS attacks (supported by KRG), Edzikhan women's Units (YJE, formed 2015 in response to ISIS attacks, supported by KRG)

Assyrian (Christian): Qaraqosh Protection Committee (formed in 2008, allied with KRG), Ninewah Plains Protection Force (NPU) supported by KRG, Tiger Guards supported by KRG

<sup>28</sup> Some examples, not all inclusive and likely dated: Liwa Abu Fadl Al Abbas "Abu Fadl Al Abbas Brigade" is a Syrian Shia militant group that was formed in 2012 to protect the shrine of Sayyidah Zaynab in Damascus; the Brigade consists of 10,000 fighters (of whom 7,000 are Iraqis). The "Dhu Al Fiqar Brigade" is an Iraqi Shia militant group formed in 2013 as a splinter off of Liwa Abu Fadl Al Abbas Fighters; approximately 1,000 Iraqi fighters in and around Damascus. Liwa Saada "Saada Brigade" is a Yemeni Shia militant group that belong to the Houthis, they are active around Damascus and its suburbs with number of 750 fighters. The Badr Organization is an Iraqi Shia militant group and a political party with personnel trained to do assassinations, kidnapping as well as urban combat; active in Damascus; they run hospitals and have a strength of approximately 1,500 fighters. The Liwa Fatemiyoun, an IRGC funded, supplied and trained Afghan Hazara unit of possibly 8,000 in strength, one of the forces currently involved in operations around Deir al-Zour.

<sup>29</sup> In Iran, the Basij Resistance Force is a volunteer paramilitary organization operating under the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). It is an auxiliary force with many duties, especially internal security, law enforcement, special religious or political events and morals policing. The Basij have branches in virtually every city and town in Iran. The Basij's growing powers have in turn increased the force's political and economic influence and contributed to the militarization of the Iranian regime.

local allies<sup>30</sup>, with the entire reason being to prevent the unification of the Kurds of Rojava into a single territorial entity stretching along the entire Turkish/Syrian border. The original Turkish goal of deposing the Bashir al-Asad regime seems to have gone by the way side since 2012. U.S. support to the military forces of the PYD/Rojava infuriates Turkey, and has resulted in diplomatic clashes. Turkish forces within northern Syria are facing Kurdish YPG/YPJ forces (called SDF), with U.S. SOF and USMC personnel supporting the Kurds. Further south, south of Tabqa Dam, SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces<sup>31</sup>) are directly in contact with Damascus Regime forces of the SAA, who have embedded Hezbollah and IRGC personnel along with accompanying Russian and Iranian-supported Hashd/PMU forces.

For the sake of brevity, I will conclude this review of the regional dynamics here. U.S. support to the Baghdad government is likely the easiest policy to continue, merely as a matter of access. The political fall-out from the 2018 elections is yet to be assessed, as it is still too far in the future to ascertain. The Kurdish referendum, if successful in declaring independence, will likely plunge the region into further conflict as at least three countries, Iraq, Turkey and Iran, cannot tolerate an independent Kurdish state as it, they fear, incite those Kurds who live in those respective countries into rebellion and secession. As for the U.S. delving into the Syria abyss, it is a voluntary venture for which this analyst sees no utility, as the size of the U.S. commitment is minimized, supports a minority which cannot hope to unify Syria, and directly spits in the eye of a major NATO ally. In addition, sustainment of U.S. forces in Syria and aid to the Kurdish allies is via the KRG in northern Iraq, which with the impending independence referendum, is a fragile reed indeed. Finally, with the Al Qaeda establishment of Hayat Tahrir al-Shem within the Idlib enclave, a viable competitor to the Islamic State can arguably be said to have arisen.

It is this analyst's opinion that the U.S. has very few positive foreign policy options within the Syria/Iraq region. With the imminent physical removal of the Islamic State as a physical entity, the loss of the single unifying factor for so many disparate elements within and without Syria/Iraq bodes ill for the future and for U.S. foreign policy efforts.

### Abbreviations

Kurdish Organization Lexicon, in Brief

Iraq: KDP- Democratic Party of Kurdistan/ PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (military arm is Peshmerga)

Iran: KDPI – Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (military arm is Peshmerga [not KDP/PUK Peshmerga]); PJAK – Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (military arm is the YRK - "East Kurdistan Defense Units)

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<sup>30</sup> Such as the Turkey-backed Free Syrian Army (TFSA), whose elements were reorganized as the Syrian National Army in 30 May 2017. They are composed mostly of Syrian Arab and Turkmen (all Sunni), are part of Operation Euphrates Shield with the stated aim to aid Turkey in creating a "safe zone" in Syria. Their opponents are the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Islamic State and the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). The TFSA also has a law enforcement element, the Free Police. The TFSA is made up of at least 39 "groups" and 10 "allied groups", a few of whom are the Free Idlib Army, the Sultan Murad Division, the Shem Legion, the 51<sup>st</sup> Brigade and the Manbij Brigade (allied group under Ahrar al-Sham, with both Al Qaeda and Turkish support).

<sup>31</sup> The Syrian Democratic Forces are largely Kurdish YPG but also included such as the following: Sanadid Force – Sunni Arab coalition which is primarily Shammar tribal militia; the Christian Syriac Military Council, in Syriac Mawtbo Fulhoyo Suryoyo (MFS), essentially Assyrian Christian militia; the Seljuk Brigade – Syrian Turkmen militia (not to be confused with the anti-ISIS and anti-Kurdish Syrian Turkmen Brigades); and the Jaish al-Thuwar (Army of Revolutionaries) – refused U.S. aid but has always been allied with the PYD. All above forces are part of the "Euphrates Volcano", a joint rebel/resistance organization in northern Syria which is anti-ISIS but 'not necessarily' anti-Damascus, is pro-U.S. but anti-Turkey.

Turkey: PKK – Kurdistan Workers Party (military arm is HPG - People’s Defense Forces and YJA-STAR - Free Women’s Units),

Syria: PYD – Democratic Union Party (military arm is YPG – People’s Protection Units, YPJ – Women’s Protection Units, YBS – Sinjar Resistance Units [associated Yezidi force])

Note - The PKK has been listed as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the U.S. State Department since October 1997, reiterated by Secretary of Defense Mattis in August 2017.

## Diane Maye

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

Islamic State could easily mutate in other another form and regenerate as soon as U.S. and coalition forces leave the region. Therefore, Iraq needs balanced, secular, and decentralized governance, especially in areas where Islamic State once held territory. One of the central issues for U.S. policy makers is that Syrians, Turks, Iranians, and the Russians have considerable influence in this region. Yet, their influence has only served to bankrupt the economy and the people.

Once the kinetic military campaign against Islamic State has commenced, U.S. foreign policy objectives should center upon the following lines of effort:

- **Repatriation:** liberated grounds must be returned to their rightful owners. This process needs to be just, legitimate, and straightforward; and it will take time.
- **Rebuilding/ Electricity/ Economics:** Next, there needs to be a rebuilding campaign. This is where the U.S. can gain a considerable amount of influence and soft power. Yet, this needs to be done in a way that does not create more corruption. For instance, electricity and power generation needs to be a priority, but electricity is often politicized. The U.S. could provide generators to the Iraqis to offset this issue, but it needs to be done in a way that does not stimulate corruption. Next, foreign policy objectives should focus on the creation of micro-economies – this will combat unemployment and the lure of radical groups.
- **Anbar Province:** The majority Sunni Anbar province is still suffering the effects of impoverishment, high mortality, and unemployment. Anbar province needs attention.
- **Secular Institutions:** Iraq needs firm and fair leadership, a commitment to institutions that benefit the people, and the revitalization of national (secular) symbols of prestige (ie, Iraqi Airways, transportation systems, schools and hospitals).
- **Iran:** U.S. diplomats and policymakers need to thwart political infiltration from Iranian-leaning militias and religious leaders.
- **Kurdish Issues:** The Kurdish population in areas once held by Islamic State is weak easily swayed by Turkish and Iranian political interests. The Kurds are interested in holding political control over Mosul and Kirkuk, but have also been pushing for independence. Without a strong coalition presence on the ground, there will be intense jockeying for power amongst regional players, which could erupt into civil war.
- **Elections:** The United Nations needs to be present during the next election cycle.

The defeat of Islamic State is not a success if the power vacuum gives rise to Iranian, Syrian, or Russian influence in the areas the group currently holds. It is important to note that U.S. isolation and rapid withdrawal is the wrong recipe for Middle East, unless we want to cede power and influence to nefarious actors.

Spencer Meredith  
National Defense University

Focusing on Syria is a good place to start given the dynamic nature of the conflict and its current trajectory, especially compared to the greater legacies of democracy/stability building that Iraq has *by comparison*. To be sure, Iraq's side of the ledger is by no means great or convincing that progress is inevitable. It simply has more resources on which to call in a post-ISIS environment.

These include

- The narrative defining conversations in Iraq has effectively shifted since ISIS's emergence, forcing the principles that guide each side in the debate about Iraq's future to counter the dystopian version presented by ISIS. This relative homogenization of language may lead to a harmonization of ideas, but either way, there is more potential for that unifying pressure in Iraq than currently in Syria, in part because the former is simply further along the path. There are ways to keep Syria's nascent steps towards a similar stable/democratic-ish system ongoing, most notably long-term engagement with SDF. Relationships built thus far are promising and potent in that regard.
- Iraq also has more political capacity to handle the stresses of autonomy-demands from its constituent parts. This results in part from fatigue from the current effusion of blood – political cultures can become “cultured” to violence in ways that actually foster compromise. Whether we call it burn out or governance learning, there is the possibility that Iraqi leadership across the groups contesting/cooperating in power can simply accept more than the Syrian counterparts in an immediate post-ISIS political environment. By no means does this mean the end of debate, or potential internecine escalations, as with Kurdish independence, but neither are those violent continuations of the current fight in Iraq inevitable.

Syria, as an earlier and more devastated version of an “Iraq” paradigm needs several levels of engagement to help it go in the right direction. Each of these corresponds to US interests at those same levels.

- Local: the key is maintaining a long-term relationship with SDF – they want to work with us, they prefer us to the Russians when given the choice, but in the absence of our partnership, they will side with the Russians because they need a big brother more than being guided by principles or alignments.
- Regional: This is a culture with living memory (in contrast to our own). In that regard, the relationship with SDF is a trial run, with others watching to see if the benefits of cooperation with the US accrue or get washed away when the US backs out and leaves them high and dry. We can call this virtual “Tit-for-Tat” and the repercussions will be long-standing if we do not continue the relationship.
- Geopolitical: Syria and Ukraine are the crucibles of Russia's hybrid warfare. Moscow has employed its queen for the global chess game in Ukraine; Syria has the remaining key pieces and those will likely not be removed until a new opportunity presents itself. Therefore, if the US is going to retain geopolitical strategic partnerships in the region, the best ones are those who grow up alongside US engagement – in contrast to those who chafe at the constraints of current international commitments with the US/international alliances (i.e., Turkey) or have clear, abiding, overriding regional aspirations at odds with US goals (Saudi Arabia). The same constraints on partnership appear among those transplanted by the US (early post-Saddam, de-Baath-ified Iraq). SDF fits the bill at this stage, and while there remain no guarantees that

partnership will continue to be beneficial, trustworthy, or heading in sync with US goals, the signs are promising thus far and therefore are worthy of continuation.

- Foremost among those signs is the nature of the coalition itself. This shows more than the exigencies of the moment, instead offering examples of learning – shifting identity markers to include former outgroup members, consensus born out of necessity but still progress in “democratic” coalition building, and cooperation that can extend beyond the immediate contests in the north.
- Challenges remain though, not least the identification of YPG with its PKK past. Yet, even here, some discount needs to be applied to the Turkish assignment of criticism for national, regional political, and internal politicking reasons.

For all these reasons, and the fact that supporting an “underdog” who has striven and overcame odds to build proto-democratic internal coalitions is part of our identity as a Democratic Great Power, the US needs to continue engagement with SDF.

Paul Rogers

Professor of Peace Studies at Bradford University

1. Following the air campaign and consequent ground operations in Iraq and Syria, a caliphate-orientated ISIS is now transitioning to a post-caliphate entity, with the geographical caliphate now represented as a symbol of what was achieved and will come again.
2. The movement has a strong eschatological element and works on a timescale measured in decades or more and it expects to take new forms. Its current post-caliphate strategy has three main components:
  - Expand to other regions, often linking in with local Islamist paramilitary movements. Main areas of concentration are Egypt, the Sahel, the Horn and West Asia but with some significant additions such as the southern Philippines.
  - Make the transition to guerrilla warfare in Iraq and Syria, aided by opposition to Habadi, Assad and Iranian influence and the decimation of the Iraqi CTS, as well as the prospect of much-increase support from western Gulf entities that are hugely concerned at the growth of the Shi'a crescent.
  - Take the war to the far enemy (Paris, Brussels, Berlin, Nice, Barcelona, Istanbul, London, Manchester, etc.) to demonstrate continued influence, retaliate for the 60,000+ air war losses, exacerbate community tensions and gain new recruits.
3. ISIS is not about to be defeated any more than Afghanistan was about to achieve peace in 2002, Iraq in 2003 or Libya in 2011. Any such talk of "defeat" is at least wishful thinking if not hubris which is unworthy of any knowledgeable strategist.
4. Any US foreign policy towards the region should recognise the following:
  - Iran has substantially increased its influence, this will not easily be countered and US policy should be fundamentally redirected towards diplomatic and economic engagement.
  - ISIS, Qaida, Nusra and all the other groups should be seen in the context of "revolts from the margins" and therefore as symptoms of a long-term trend rather than individual threats to be suppressed by military action.
  - The generic drivers of such revolts are widening socio-economic divisions and majority marginalisation, especially in the MENA region's non-oil producing states and more generally across substantial areas of the Global South. As we move into an era of sustained irregular war these will be progressively exacerbated by the rapidly increasing impact of climate disruption.
5. In such circumstances the traditional control paradigm of military suppression has not worked over the past sixteen years and will not work in the coming years – the generic drivers must be addressed.

Daniel Serwer  
Middle East Institute

The wars in Iraq and Syria have enormously enhanced Iran's and Hizbollah's positions in the region. They will claim credit for defeat of the Islamic State and get it from many people, even among Sunnis. The US is viewed in the region as inept at best, malicious at worst. The tide favors Islamism, in both its Shia and Sunni variants. Washington can do little about this but try to keep the liberal democrats of the region from drowning. Support to the Syrian opposition and to those few Iraqis not caught up in Islamism should continue, in the hope that the tide will someday subside and leave the region in the hands of those who would turn it in the direction of more liberal democracy.

The U.S. will be tempted after the defeat of ISIS to withdraw. I think this is the right impulse, but it has to be done in a way that does not leave a vacuum that extremists or Iran will fill. The W. Bush and Obama Administration failed at preventing such vacuums from emerging. The Trump Administration needs to be careful not to let it happen again.

Martin Styszynski  
Adam Mickiewicz University

The collapse of main ISIS strongholds in Iraq and Syria creates new political and social environment in those countries. The US foreign policy in post-ISIS environments shall focus on regional and religious tendencies in certain parts of Iraq and Syria, especially in the context of Sunni-Shia rivalry. In fact, marginalization of Sunni communities by Shia majority after Saddam Hussein's regime has affected and stimulated jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, which exploited sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia inhabitants in Iraq and Syria. The battle of Falluja in 2003-2004 between Sunni insurgents and Shia-Western allies is a good example in that context. The Alawi domination of Al-Assad regime in Syria against Sunni populations is another feature, too.

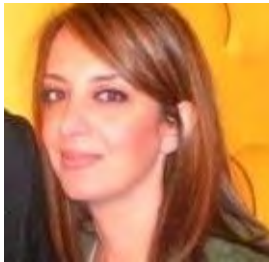
Post-ISIS scenarios shall reconsider handover of more power and security responsibilities to local groups that represent interests of particular social, ethnic or tribal communities. For instance, the Sunni Sahwa (renaissance) militias in Iraq fought successfully against Al-Qaeda. Jihadist threats increased after dissolution of this militias. Besides, it was one the main reasons of ISIS activities in Iraq.

Moreover, Shia groups, which have recaptured recently Iraqi provinces from ISIS are not credible and respected among local Sunni populations that complain about religious or ethnic persecutions. It should be noted that implementation of separatism or semi-autonomous status of particular provinces in Iraq and Syria will respond to political reality in the Middle East. Conflict zones in Iraq (Al-Anbar Province, Kirkuk or Mosul) and Syria (Idlib, Hama, Aleppo, Deir al-Zor) have been already separated between different forces, which disagree with ideological or religious opponents as well as central governments in Bagdad or Damascus.

The idea of autonomy shall be balanced and it should be ruled under the umbrella of federation model coordinated by central authorities (parliament, national assembly, government) in capitals of both countries. The similar model has succeeded already in Balkan after a long, bloody war in nineties. However, permanent and complete independence cause additional problems and criticism from central governments or neighboring countries. The present independence referendum in Kurdistan is a good example in this context. Future events and decisions will show whether we are facing a new Sykes-Picot plan in the Middle East.

## Biographies

### Hala Abdulla



Hala Abdulla joined USMC Center for Advanced Operational Cultural Learning (CAOCL) in September 2010 as the CENTCOM regional researcher and Subject Matter Expert under the Regional Cultural Language Familiarization (RCLF) team. Prior to 2003 Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), she worked for al-Arab daily International Newspaper in Baghdad office. Following OIF, she worked for four years as a journalist and cultural advisor with the U.S. Army Joint Psychological Operations Task Force (JPOTF) in Baghdad's Green Zone. Since coming to the United States twelve years ago, she has worked from (2007-2009) as an online Content Manager and team leader for Iraqi/Arab journalists and reporters under a CENTCOM-sponsored Transregional Web Initiative (TRWI), an Iraq-focused website. Hala also worked from (2009-2010) as a Social Media Analyst under USSTRATCOM's 'Foreign Media Analysis' initiative. Hala was born and raised in Baghdad, and is a native Arabic speaker, fluent in five regional dialects. She holds a B.A in English Language and Literature from al-Ma'amun University in Baghdad (1996), and an M.A. in Strategic Communications from American University in Washington D.C. (2013). She authored 'Iraq's Mosul: Battle of Psychological War. Quantico Sentry, June 2014, and Co-authored 'The Struggle for Democracy in Iraq: from the inside looking out,' American Diplomacy, April, 2010.

### Gawdat Bahgat



Dr. Gawdat Bahgat is professor of National Security Affairs at the National Defense University's Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Study. He is an Egyptian-born specialist in Middle Eastern policy, particularly Egypt, Iran, and the Gulf region. His areas of expertise include energy security, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, counter-terrorism, Arab-Israeli conflict, North Africa, and American foreign policy in the Middle East.

Bahgat's career blends scholarship with national security practicing. Before joining NESA in December 2009, he taught at different universities. Bahgat published ten books including *Alternative Energy in the Middle East* (2013), *Energy Security* (2011), *International Political Economy* (2010), *Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East* (2007), *Israel and the Persian Gulf* (2006), and *American Oil Diplomacy* (2003). Bahgat's articles have appeared in *International Affairs*, *Middle East Journal*, *Middle East Policy*, *Oil and Gas Journal*, and *OPEC Review*, among others. His work has been translated to several foreign languages.

Bahgat served as an advisor to several governments and oil companies. He has more than 25 years of academic, policy and government experience working on Middle Eastern issues. Bahgat has contributed to CNN, BBC, Washington Post and Al-Jazeera. He has spoken at Tufts University, Columbia University, London School of Economics, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, Swiss Foreign Ministry, Yildiz Technical University in Istanbul, Qatar University, Kuwait University, Oman Diplomatic Institute, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (Saudi Arabia), Griffith University (Australia), India School of Business (Hyderabad, India), Institute of Military-Aeronautic Sciences (Florence, Italy), University of Viterbo, (Rome, Italy), and Institute for International Political Studies (Milan, Italy).

## Perry Cammack



Perry Cammack is a fellow in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where he focuses on long-term regional trends and their implications for American foreign policy. Prior to joining Carnegie in August 2015, Cammack worked on issues related to the Middle East as part of the policy planning staff of Secretary of State John Kerry from 2013 to 2015 and as a senior professional staff member for then senator Kerry on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) from 2009 to 2012. From 2003 to 2006, he worked on the SFRC staff of then senator Joseph Biden, Jr.

Cammack has a master's degree in public administration from the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University and bachelor's degrees in economics and philosophy from the University of Maryland.

He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the International Institute for Strategic Studies and a part-time adjunct professor at the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University.

## Patricia DeGennaro



Patricia (Tricia) DeGennaro is a Senior Geopolitical Risk Analyst for Threat Tec., LLC. She currently supports the US Army TRADOC G2/G27 as an analyst on ACE Futures and the Network Engagement Team. DeGennaro has lectured at West Point and New York University on International Security Policy and Civilian and Military Affairs. She was selected as a Subject Matter Expert (SME) on the Middle East, Iraq, and Afghanistan for various projects under the TRADOC G2, the commander of the Multi-National Forces in Iraq, commander of the Special Operations Command Central, and the US Department of Defense Strategic Multilayer Assessment program. In 2013,

she was accepted into the US Department of State Franklin Fellows program where she served in USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance - Office of Civilian and Military Cooperation (DCHA/CMC) as a Senior Policy Advisor to support the Office and an Agency-wide Civilian-Military Cooperation Steering Committee in an extensive revision to the Agency's Civilian-Military Cooperation Policy. DeGennaro capitalizes on over twenty years of experience as an academic, author and consultant in international security. Much of her work focuses on stabilization in the Middle East and surrounding region, countering violent extremism, and transitioning nations from war.

During her tenure, she has also consulted with the Asia Foundation, Director of National Intelligence Office, Department of Homeland Security, The Conference Board, World Bank, Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee chaired by Senator Edward M. Kennedy, and several organizations that support the Middle East Peace Process. She also spent four years in Albania as a Small and Medium Enterprise volunteer with the Peace Corps and, later, as a contractor with US Agency for International Development. Regionally, DeGennaro continues to focus on the Balkans, the Middle East and South Asia where she travels often.

DeGennaro has published several articles on US foreign policy and national security topics. Her focus is to encourage an integrated international policy that looks beyond war and the use of force. She is often

an expert commentator for CNN, MSNBC, Al Jazeera, Fox News, BBC and various nationally and internationally syndicated radio programs.

DeGennaro holds an MBA in International Trade and Finance from George Washington University and an MPA in International Security and Conflict Resolution from Harvard University. She speaks fluent Albanian and has a basic knowledge of Italian, Arabic and Dari.

### Global Cultural Knowledge Network, TRADOC G2



The Global Cultural Knowledge Network (GCKN) is a part of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command G2. Our mission is to enable a holistic understanding of potential future operational environments (OE) through the collection of expertise and information and the development of products/services to enhance OE understanding at the operational level. GCKN combines the intellectual capacity of military, academic, and industry experts and brings it to the Army's next mission.

### Vernie Liebl

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**Vernie Liebl** is an analyst currently sitting as the Middle East Desk Officer in the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL). Mr. Liebl retired from the Marine Corps and has a background in intelligence, specifically focused on the Middle East and South Asia.

Prior to joining CAOCL, Mr. Liebl worked with the Joint Improvised Explosives Device Defeat Organization as a Cultural SME, and before that with Booz Allen Hamilton as a Strategic Islamic Narrative Analyst. He has also published extensively on topics ranging from the Caliphate to Vichy French campaigns in WW2.

Mr. Liebl has a Bachelors degree in political science from University of Oregon, a Masters degree in Islamic History from the University of Utah, and a second Masters degree in National Security and Strategic Studies from the Naval War College (where he graduated with “Highest Distinction” and focused on Islamic Economics).

## Diane Maye



Dr. Diane Maye is an Assistant Professor of Homeland Security and Global Conflict Studies at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Florida and an affiliated faculty member at George Mason University’s Center for Narrative and Conflict Resolution. She also served as a Visiting Professor of Political Science at John Cabot University in Rome, Italy. Diane earned a Ph.D. in Political Science from George Mason University; her dissertation focuses on Iraqi political alignments and alliances after the fall of the Ba’ath party. Diane has taught undergraduate level courses in International Relations, Comparative Politics, Homeland Security, American Foreign Policy, Terrorism and Counterterrorism Analysis, Beginner Arabic, and Political Islam. Her major research interests include: security issues in the Middle East and U.S. defense policy. Diane

has published several scholarly works and has appeared in online and scholarly mediums including: The Digest of Middle East Studies, The Journal of Terrorism Research, The National Interest, Radio Algeria, The Bridge, Business Insider, Small Wars Journal, Military One, In Homeland Security, and the New York Daily News.

Prior to her work in academia, Diane served as an officer in the United States Air Force and worked in the defense industry. Upon leaving the Air Force, Diane worked for an Italian-U.S. defense company managing projects in foreign military sales, proposal development, and the execution of large international communications and physical security projects for military customers. During the Iraq war, she worked for Multi-National Force-Iraq in Baghdad, managing over 400 bilingual, bicultural advisors to the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Department of Defense. She has done freelance business consulting for European, South American, and Middle Eastern clients interested in security and defense procurement, and is currently the official representative of MD Helicopters in Iraq. Diane is a member of the Military Writers Guild, an associate editor for The Bridge, and a member of the Terrorism Research Analysis Consortium. She is a graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy and the Naval Postgraduate School.

## Spencer Meredith



Dr. Spencer B. Meredith III, PhD is an Associate Professor of National Security Strategy in the College of International Security Affairs (CISA) at the National Defense University (NDU). For two decades, he has researched and worked on the Russian problem set in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. His expertise in democratization and conflict resolution in Eastern European and Middle Eastern politics has also led him to support SOCOM projects on countering Russian influence operations in Ukraine and the Baltics, CENTCOM programs analyzing and supporting effective governance in Iraq and Syria, and other USASOC efforts on narratives, deterrence, and a range of violent and non-violent conflicts. His publications include his first book on democratic development and international nuclear safety agreements (*Nuclear Energy and International Cooperation: Closing the World's Most Dangerous Reactors*), as well as articles in scholarly journals ranging from *Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, *Peace and Conflict Studies*, to *Central European Political Science Review*. He has also published in professional journals related to hybrid warfare and the future operating environment, with articles in *Inter-Agency Journal*, *Special Warfare*, *Foreign Policy Journal*, and the peer-reviewed *Special Operations Journal*.

## Paul Rogers



**Paul Rogers** is Professor of Peace Studies at Bradford University where he has taught courses on international and environmental security, arms control and political violence. He originally took his doctorate in plant sciences at Imperial College, and then lectured there as well as working as a Senior Scientific Officer on a crop research programme in East Africa.

He moved into peace and conflict research 40 years ago through an interest in environmental science and conflict over resources, and his publications include 27 books and over 150 papers. His books include *A War Too Far: Iran, Iraq and the New American Century* (Pluto Press, 2006) and *Global Security and the War on Terror: Elite Power and the Illusion of Control* (Routledge, 2007). A third edition of his book, *Losing Control: Global Security in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, was published in 2010 and his most recent book is *Irregular War: The New Threats from the Margins* (I B Tauris, 2017). His work has been translated into many languages including Catalan, Chinese, Dutch, Farsi, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Thai and Turkish. He was Chair of the British International Studies Association, 2002-04.

Paul Rogers lectures regularly at universities and defence colleges including the Royal College of Defence Studies, is an Honorary Fellow of the UK Joint Service Command and Staff College and has given evidence to several Parliamentary Select Committees. He is a frequent broadcaster on international security issues for the BBC World Service and other international and national networks including the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, US National Public Radio, German Radio, RTV Hong Kong, Monocle 24, Austrian FM4 and Radio France International. He writes a weekly analysis of international security trends for [www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net) and is global security consultant to Oxford Research Group.

Paul's work in recent years has largely been on the unexpected outcomes of fighting a "war on terror" but he also continues to pursue a long-term interest in the relationship between socio-economic divisions and environmental constraints, especially climate disruption, as causes of international instability and conflict. He is currently involved in the Network for Social Change's project on "Remote Warfare" which focuses on the implications of using armed drones, Special Forces and privatised military companies in responding to security challenges.

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## Daniel Serwer



Also a scholar at the Middle East Institute, Daniel Serwer is the author of *Righting the Balance* (Potomac Books, November 2013), editor (with David Smock) of *Facilitating Dialogue* (USIP, 2012) and supervised preparation of *Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction* (USIP, 2009). *Righting the Balance* focuses on how to strengthen the civilian instruments of American foreign policy to match its strong military arm. *Facilitating Dialogue* analyzes specific cases and best practices in getting people to talk to each other in conflict zones. *Guiding Principles* is the leading compilation of best practices for civilians and military in post-war state-building.

As vice president of the Centers of Innovation at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Serwer led teams working on rule of law, peacebuilding, religion, economics, media, technology, security sector governance and gender. He was also vice president for peace and stability operations at USIP, overseeing its peacebuilding work in Afghanistan, the Balkans, Iraq and Sudan and serving as executive director of the Hamilton/Baker Iraq Study Group.

As a minister-counselor at the U.S. Department of State, Serwer directed the European office of intelligence and research and served as U.S. special envoy and coordinator for the Bosnian Federation, mediating between Croats and Muslims and negotiating the first agreement reached at the Dayton Peace Talks; from 1990 to 1993, he was deputy chief of mission and chargé d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Rome, leading a major diplomatic mission through the end of the Cold War and the first Gulf War.

Serwer is a graduate of Haverford College and earned masters degrees at the University of Chicago and Princeton, where he also did his PhD in history.

## Martin Styszynski



**Marcin Styszynski** (PhD) is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland. He also served as the cultural and scientific attaché in the Embassy of Poland in Egypt (2009-2012) and the second secretary in the Embassy of Poland in Algeria (2012-2014). In 2016 he started new duties of Consul in the Embassy of Poland in Riyadh.

## Sarah Canna



**Sarah Canna** applies her open source analytic skills to regions of vital concern to US Combatant Commands, particularly the Middle East and South Asia. To help military planners understand the complex socio-cultural dynamics at play in evolving conflict situations, she developed a Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa™) tool, which is designed to rapidly respond to emergent crises by pulsing NSI's extensive subject matter expert (SME) network to provide deep, customized, multidisciplinary analysis for defense and industry clients. Prior to joining NSI, she completed her Master's degree from Georgetown University in Technology and Security Studies. She holds a translation certificate in Spanish from American University and has been learning Dari for three years.