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Middle East Flashpoint

Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East & Islamic Studies
University of Peloponnese

No 32

2 December 2012

Iraq and the Syrian conflict

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The article is about the Iraqi stance on the Syrian crisis and in particular of the official government, the Sunni minority in Iraq, the Iraqi Kurds and the tribes in Iraq. Each party has its own goals and interests in the outcome of the Syrian civil war and we will see them unfold below.

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In order to understand Iraq's foreign policy in the region and in Syria in particular, we must first see the composition of the Shia-led coalition government in post-US Iraq. The Maliki government which was formed on November 10, 2010, with reported direct intervention by President Obama, the "Irbil Agreement"¹, consists mainly of the Shia majority and the Iraqi Kurds who enjoy autonomy in the north of the country. This coalition is far from perfect something that is more obvious after the decision of the Iraqi criminal court to sentence to death the exile Sunni Vice President Tariq al Hashemi and his son in law, on charges that he masterminded death squads against rivals in a terror trial that has fueled sectarian tensions in the country.²

Caught up in its own crisis among Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish parties paralyzing its power-sharing government, Iraq finds itself in a delicate position, even more so after the withdrawal of the last American troops in December.³ Each party therefore has its own interests and goals regarding the Syrian civil war.

The Iraqi government despite the outbreak of the widespread civil war in Syria is continuing its policy of rapprochement with the Al-Assad regime⁴ and does not align itself with reactions of other Western and GCC governments. It is probable that Iran is behind today's Iraqi policy⁵ but as far as Iraq is concerned security comes first. That is because there is the fear of a possible spillover of violence in Iraq from the armed Sunni militants who fight against the Assad regime. This led Iraqi military forces to tighten border controls at Abu Kamal crossing.⁶

The possible collapse of Al-Assad's Alawite(a Shia offshoot)-dominated regime could put Syria's Arab Sunni majority in power in Iraq's western neighborhood. This possibility could embolden Iraqi Sunnis, who are challenging Shia control in Iraq, thus exacerbating the country's sectarian tensions.⁷ This is mainly why, since the Arab League Summit in March, they have supported the position of China, Russia, and Iran that the Syrians should be left to resolve their internal differences through dialogue and political reform, with the international community providing only mediation and monitors of a ceasefire.⁸

The Iraqi government is in a predicament in the sense that if the Assad regime stands and Iraq had helped the armed opposition repercussions will be inevitable. On the other hand, the opposite will probably happen if the Sunni majority of Syria takes over, as they would want to help Iraqi Sunnis against the Baghdad government. Baghdad, the Sadr movement, elements of the Shiite clerical establishment, and many others have all voiced fears that if Assad were to go, Sunni militants would take over or at least be able to take advantage of the ensuing chaos to establish new bases⁹ and threaten Iraq's security.

On the other hand Iraqi Sunnis support the efforts of the Western governments and other GCC states to overthrow the Assad regime. What is happening in Syria is an oppressed Sunni population finally overthrowing an Iranian backed dictatorship, something that resonates well among Iraqi Sunnis.¹⁰ If Assad falls and a Sunni led government comes in office in Syria, then the Iraqi Sunnis will receive more assistance since they could benefit from the direct support of the new Syrian government as well as the assistance of many returning Syrian veterans and renewed enthusiasm for Sunni-based insurgencies.¹¹

Iraqi Kurds enjoy a semi-autonomous regime in the North of Iraq, where they have their own regional government (Kurdish Regional Government), their own parliament, police, armed forces (Peshmerga), judiciary and in general have what is closest to an independent state, till now.¹²

The Iraqi Kurds now see the Syrian Civil war as a double opportunity, as it could serve as a means of strengthening ties with Turkey¹³, their main ally against Baghdad since they can demonstratively contribute to Turkish security by using their influence to moderate the policies of Syria's Kurds. If the Assad regime is to fall then the Iraqi government and state

might follow, creating the possibility of greater ties among Kurds in Syria, Iraq, Turkey or even Iran.¹⁴ The Kurds have opened talks with the Syrian National Council (SNC), the opposition in exile's central body. Since December, Iraq's National Security Minister Faleh Al-Fayyad has visited with the regime and the Damascus-based opposition, the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB) and have some influence over Syrian Kurds and may prove to be Iraq's trump card.¹⁵ Furthermore the Kurdish government in the North of Iraq is training Syrian-Kurdish fighters who will be sent to defend Kurdish territory at home, said Barzani, the President of Iraqi Kurdistan, admitting for the first time the existence of training camps in the Kurdish region.¹⁶ The Iraqi-Kurds main goal is to expand their influence over neighboring regions populated by Kurds.

Regarding the tribes, Iraq has approximately 150 tribes that are composed of about 2,000 smaller clans, with varying sizes and influence. The largest tribe numbers more than one million people (Shammar tribe) the smallest a few thousands. 75% of the total Iraqi population are members of a tribe or have kinship to one.¹⁷ Iraq has thousands of tribal groups to which various people pledge their loyalty, ranging from extended family clans that may number just several hundred people to broad confederations of clans that claim the loyalty of a million or more.¹⁸

Their position on the Syrian uprising is complex. On the one hand, the Shammar instinctively want to support their Syrian cousins and could gain tremendously from a friendly Sunni led government in Damascus.¹⁹ On the other hand, both Baghdad and the Assad regime are intensely courting them. Maliki for instance offered the Shammar tribesmen jobs in the security forces as well as the most traditional of incentives: government-funded irrigation of tribal farmlands.²⁰ The Assad regime has used some Shammar sub-tribes in Syria as armed militias to suppress Kurdish activism in the northeast. Thus far, the Shammar have been following Baghdad's advice not to add fuel to the fire in Syria, at least publicly and rhetorically.²¹ The overall influence of the tribes is uncertain since, as an Iraqi academic said the tribal leaders are "the ultimate pragmatists"²² meaning that they do everything to ensure their interests.

All in all Iraq is walking on thin ice regarding its' Syrian policy because of the complexity of its internal situation and the need to stabilize the government. The factors that comprise Iraqi political scene (Shia, Sunni, Kurds and the tribes) have all different interests and want to achieve their own goals.

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