

# COMMENTARY

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## **An Iraqi Sunni State is Prerequisite to Defeating ISIS**

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One of the main prerequisites to defeating ISIS in Iraq and stabilizing the country is the establishment of an independent Sunni Iraqi state alongside the current Shiite government and the autonomous Kurdish entity. As long as the Sunni Iraqis do not know what the future has in store for them, they will be unwilling to make the necessary sacrifices to battle ISIS only to benefit the Shiite government in Baghdad, which they despise even more than ISIS. Concurrently with the fight against ISIS, the Obama administration must begin to negotiate with the Shiite government in Baghdad over the future status of the Sunnis in Iraq.

For the White House to still believe that Iraq somehow can be stitched together following the defeat of ISIS is a gross illusion. Iraq's partition into three entities became de facto immediately following the Iraq war in 2003.

Having lost their dominance of Iraq to the Shiites in 2003 after 81 years of continuous rule, the Sunnis still refuse to accept what they consider to be a historic travesty. This was further aggravated by eight years of the Shiite government led by Nouri al-Maliki, who abused his power and marginalized, mistreated, and victimized the Sunni community.

The fact is the coalition of more than a dozen countries, led by the US, to battle ISIS from the air and ground has thus far failed due to 1) a lack of a comprehensive strategy that will include, in addition to the Iraqis, a significant number of ground troops assembled from some EU but mostly from Arab states and led by the US, and 2) the absence of a strategy about the future of the Iraqi

Sunnis before they can be fully enlisted to fight against ISIS, which occupies much of their three provinces.

The Sunnis find themselves inadvertently and often voluntarily supporting ISIS as they are more religiously aligned with ISIS than with the Shiite majority, who appear to be determined to control the levers of power in all walks of life and continue to subjugate the Sunni community.

The presumed unity government in Iraq that the US sought is a farce. There is no unity; Prime Minister Abadi is weak and has done little to pacify the Sunnis in his country. Iran exerts significant political influence in Baghdad and is actively engaged in the fight against ISIS, to which the US has quietly acquiesced, especially following the Iran deal.

The Sunni Iraqis do not view Iran's involvement as transient, and learning from their past experience, they will under no circumstances surrender their future to the whims of Tehran, which they consider to be a staunch enemy.

A top Iraqi official recently told me he didn't see how Iraq can be restored to the pre-2003 status. It is painful, but we must now accept the new reality and act soon, and perhaps restore some civility and work together with the Kurds and the Sunnis, albeit under separate political rule.

The Saudis, who are alarmed by Iran's regional ambitions and its systematic violent meddling in the Arab states' domestic affairs—in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and many other countries—strongly feel that only by allowing the Sunni Iraqis to establish their own autonomy can they prevent Iran from completely controlling Iraq.

Moreover, given the fact (which the US recognizes) that the Iraqi Kurds are on their way to complete independence, it will be impossible to keep the Sunnis at bay. In a May 2015 meeting in DC, President Masoud Barzani of Iraqi Kurdistan publicly declared his intention to move toward independence, which was later confirmed by a top US official as being inevitable.

Although the Kurds suffered greatly under Saddam Hussein's Sunni regime, they now see eye-to-eye with the Sunnis as both consider the Shiite government to be hostile and reject the idea of federalism, regardless of how loosely connected they will be to the central government in Baghdad.

The US must now begin a dialogue with the Iraqi government and the Sunni leadership to establish a framework for Iraqi Sunni political autonomy along the Iraqi Kurdish model, which will eventually lead to complete independence.

Given the lack of oil in the three Sunni provinces, the central issue that must be addressed in the context of Sunni independence is equitable distribution of the country's oil revenue. This would

require a strict, internationally monitored, and binding mechanism from the UN Security Council to ensure permanent and full compliance.

The Sunnis need unequivocal assurance that under no circumstances will any Shiite government withhold distribution of funds and hold the Sunni state hostage without suffering immediate and clearly spelled out political and financial consequences, including crippling sanctions and the suspension of any financial and military aid.

The Iraqi Kurds have already established such a precedent as they transfer funds from their independent oil sales to the Iraqi central government, despite the recent dispute with Baghdad over the payment of Kurdish salaries in exchange for oil. To be sure, the three independent states will have to work out a formula that will satisfy their legitimate share of oil revenue.

An equitable agreement on sharing oil revenue could also pave the way over time to better and closer relations between the three states, which will lead to greater cooperation in many other fields, including joint economic development programs, security cooperation, trade, etc.

The Obama administration must now think seriously about the need to provide the Iraqi Sunnis with a new horizon and hopeful future, which must be part and parcel of the strategy to defeat ISIS.

In this regard, the US must make it abundantly clear to Tehran that the US will not tolerate any subversive activity to undermine the welfare and stability of the Sunni state once established.

For Iran to take this warning seriously, the US might well have to provide security guarantees to the Sunni entity along the lines of its commitment to the security of the autonomous Iraqi Kurds.

Once the line is drawn between the Sunnis, Kurds, and Shiites, it will also have a serious positive impact on the proxy Sunni-Shiite war waged both in Syria and Iraq between Saudi Arabia and Iran for regional dominance, which could otherwise last for decades to come.

The lack of a clear American strategy in Iraq, to which President Obama admitted in June 2015 (“We don’t yet have a complete strategy because it requires commitments on the part of the Iraqis”) is baffling. It raises the question of how the US could engage in a war without having a clear strategy to defeat the enemy, and what the desired outcome should be.

This lack of a strategy allowed extremist groups of all political and religious persuasions to converge on Iraq and Syria and take advantage of the chaotic situation that has swept both countries.

The Obama administration, with its coalition partners, must now develop a strategy to defeat ISIS, which will be extremely difficult unless Iraqi Sunnis join the fight and are assured that their future political independence is secure.

**Note:** This article was originally published in the web portal of Prof. Ben-Meir and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/an-iraqi-sunni-state-is-prerequisite-to-defeating-isis/>

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