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The Next Middle East War, Post-ISIS

Peter Van Buren

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Islamic State is in fatal decline. The Middle East will soon enter a new era, post-Islamic State, dominated by the Saudi-Iranian power struggle. The struggle will, as it has as it ran alongside the fight against Islamic State, involve shifting Sunni and Shiite allegiances. But the fight is not about religion. Religion this time has more to do with complicating choices in political bedfellows and where proxies are recruited than dogma. For behind that Sunni-Shiite curtain, this is a classic geopolitical power struggle – for control of Iraq and Syria, and for expanding diplomatic and strategic reach throughout the region.

In the fight against Islamic State, it has been all too easy to cite expediency in putting complex issues aside, but as the alliances created for that struggle run their course, the new reality will force changes. With the strategic value of funding Islamic State as a bulwark against Iranian influence in Iraq gone, the Saudis appear to be pivoting toward building warmer relations with the Shiite government in Baghdad. That a Saudi airline is just now announcing the first return of direct service between the two countries since Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990 is no coincidence, nor is it an isolated event

The Saudis also appear willing to let a lot of religious water pass under the bridge to take advantage of a looming intra-Shiite power struggle in Baghdad among Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (above), and Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. Sadr,

the most religiously zealous Shiite of the group, has always been something of a nationalist, and unlike his rivals, is wary of Iranian influence. It is perhaps not surprising that he has made friendly trips to Sunni Riyadh and the United Arab Emirates, the first time in 11 years done under official invitation from Saudi Arabia.

Sadr is an interesting choice for the Saudis to use to gain influence in Baghdad. Real progress for Riyadh means untangling years of close Iranian cooperation in Iraq, to include limiting the power of the Iranian-backed militias. Sadr has significant influence among the militias, and can use his religious credibility to sell Saudi cooperation to the vast numbers of his followers who remember well the Saudis funded al Qaeda in Iraq and Islamic State's killing of so many Shiites over the years. Further enhancing Sadr's Shiite religious status can thus further Sunni Saudi goals. During his visit, the Saudis gifted Sadr with \$10 million for "rebuilding," but also astutely threw in some special visas for this year's Hajj pilgrimage for Sadr to distribute.

One should not, however, sell Iran short. Its ties to officials in Baghdad are a tiny part of a deep relationship forged in the bloody fight against the American occupiers. Iranian special forces then helped defeat Islamic State, Iranian money continues to support Iraq, and the Shiite militias who will suddenly have a lot less to occupy their time post-Islamic State are still mostly under Iranian influence. In the absence of any effective national army, no government will stand long in Baghdad without militia support. At the moment, Iran is way ahead in Iraq.

Iran is also likely to be a winner in Syria. Islamic State's defeat will significantly lessen Sunni influence there, and Iran's role as Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's protector will only increase in value now that it appears Assad will remain in control of some portion of the country. The Saudis backed the wrong team and are left with little influence.

In addition to a strong hand in Iraq and Syria, Iran is also probably the most stable Muslim nation in the Middle East. It has existed more or less within its current borders for thousands of years, and is largely religiously, culturally, and linguistically homogeneous (though keep an eye on the Kurdish minority.) While still governed in significant part by its clerics, the country has held a series of increasingly democratic electoral transitions since the 1979 revolution. And unlike the Saudis, Iran's leaders do not rule in fear of an Islamic revolution. They already had one.

Power struggles create flashpoints, and the Saudi-Iranian struggle post-Islamic State is no exception.

The Saudi-Iranian proxy war in Yemen has settled into a version of World War I-style trench warfare, with neither side strong enough to win or weak enough to lose. In an ugly form of stasis, the conflict seems likely to stay within its present borders.

A potential powder keg however lies in Kurdistan. The Kurds, a de facto state arguably since 2003, did the one thing they weren't allowed to do, pull the tiger's tale by holding a formal independence referendum. That vote required everyone with a stake to consider their next moves instead of leaving well enough alone.

Iran, and the Iranian-backed government now in Baghdad, are clear they will not tolerate an actual Kurdish state. With Islamic State defeated, those governments will simultaneously lose the need to make nice to keep the Kurds in that fight and find themselves with combat-tested Shiite militias ready for the next task. Following a Shiite move against the Kurds, and stymied in Yemen, imagine the Saudis throwing their support into the fight, and a new proxy war will be underway right on Iran's own western border.

While it may seem odd to write about the balance of power in the Middle East leaving out the United States, that may very well describe America's range of options post-Islamic State.

The United States, which did so much via its unnecessary invasion of Iraq and tragic handling of the postwar period to nurture the growth of Islamic State, seems the least positioned of all players to find a place in a post-Islamic State Middle East. American influence in Baghdad is limited, and with Washington having declared its opposition to the Kurdish independence referendum, likely limited in Erbil as well. Détente with Iran is in shambles under the Trump administration, leaving Washington with few options other than perhaps supporting the Saudis in whatever meddling they do in Iraq.

Having followed his predecessor's single minded "strategy" of simply "destroy Islamic State," there are no signs the Trump administration has any ideas about what to do next, and with the military exhausted and the State Department apparently sitting out international relations at present, it is unclear if any will emerge. It will soon be mission accomplished for America with nothing much to follow. And if that sounds familiar, echoing back to 2003, well, then you understand how things got to where they are.