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Sectarian Monster Reawakened: Redrawing the Map of Iraq, Again

By Ramzy Baroud

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"Labeiki ya Zaynab," chanted Iraqi Shia fighters as they swayed, dancing with their rifles before TV news cameras in Baghdad on June 13. They were apparently getting ready for a difficult fight ahead. For them, it seemed that a suitable war chant would be answering the call of Zaynab, the daughter of Imam Ali, the great Muslim Caliph who lived in Medina 14 centuries ago. That was the period through which the Shia sect slowly emerged, based on a political dispute whose consequences are still felt until this day.

Dark Forces of Sectarianism

That chant alone is enough to demonstrate the ugly sectarian nature of the war in Iraq, which has reached an unprecedented highpoint in recent days. Fewer than 1,000 fighters from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) advanced against Iraq's largest city of Mosul on June 10, sending two Iraqi army divisions (nearly 30,000 soldiers) to a chaotic retreat.

The call to arms was made by a statement issued by Iraq's most revered Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and read on his behalf during a Friday prayer's sermon in Kerbala. "People who are capable of carrying arms and fighting the terrorists in defense of their country

(..) should volunteer to join the security forces to achieve this sacred goal," the statement in part read.

The terrorists of whom Sistani speaks are those of ISIL, whose numbers throughout the region is estimated to be at only 7,000 fighters. They are well organized, fairly well-equipped and absolutely ruthless in their conduct.

To secure their remarkable territorial gains, they quickly moved south, closing in on other Iraqi towns: They attacked and took over Baiji on June 11. On the same day, they conquered Tikrit, the town of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, where they were joined by ex-Baathist fighters. For two days, they tried to take over Samarra, but couldn't, only to move against Jalawala and Saaddiyah, to the east of Baghdad. It is impossible to verify reports of what is taking place in towns that fall under the control of ISIL, but considering their notoriously bloody legacy in Syria, and ISIL's own online reporting on their own activities, one can expect the worse.

On June 13, a United Nations spokesperson said hundreds of people were possibly killed in the fighting, many of whom were summarily executed. ISIL's own gory propaganda video footage and pictures give much credence to the claim.

Within days, ISIL was in control of a large swathe of land which lumped together offers a new map fully altering the political boundaries of the Middle East that were largely envisioned by colonial powers France and Britain nearly a century ago.

Ongoing US War

What the future holds is difficult to predict. The US administration is petrified by the notion of getting involved in Iraq once more. It was its original meddling, at the behest of the notorious neoconservatives who largely determined US foreign policy during George W. Bush's administration that ignited this ongoing strife in the first place. They admitted failure and withdrew in Dec. 2011, hoping to sustain a level of influence over the Iraqi government under Shia Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. They failed miserably as well and it is now Iran that is an influential foreign power in Baghdad.

In fact, Iran's influence and interests are so strong that despite much saber-rattling by US President Barack Obama, the US cannot possibly modify the massively changing reality in Iraq without Iranian help. Reports in US and British media are pointing to possible US-Iranian involvement to counter ISIL, not just in Iraq, but also in Syria.

History is accelerating at a frantic speed. Seemingly impossible alliances are being hastily formed. Maps are being redrawn in directions that are determined by masked fighters with automatic weapons mounted on the back of pickup trucks. True, no one could have predicted such events, but when some warned that the Iraq war would 'destabilize' the Middle East for many years to come, this is precisely what they meant.

When Bush led his war on Iraq in order to fight al-Qaeda, the group simply didn't exist in that country; the war however, brought al-Qaeda to Iraq. A mix of hubris and ignorance of the facts – and lack of understanding of Iraq's history – allowed the Bush administration to sustain that horrible war. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis perished in an immoral military quest. Those who were not killed, were maimed, tortured, raped or fled into a borderless Iraqi odyssey.

The Americans toyed with Iraq in numerous ways. They dissolved the army, dismissed all government institutions, attempted to restructure a new society based on the recommendations of Pentagon and CIA analysts in Washington D.C. and Virginia. They oppressed the Sunni Muslims, empowered Shia, and fed the flame of sectarianism with no regard to the consequences. When things didn't go as planned, they tried to empower some Shia groups over others, and armed some Sunni groups to fight the Iraqi resistance to the war, which was mostly made of Sunni fighters.

And the consequences were most bloody. Iraq's civil war of 2006-07 claimed tens of thousands to be added to the ever-growing toll caused by the war adventure. No sham elections were enough to remedy the situation, no torture technique was enough to suppress the rebellion, and no fiddling with the sectarian or ethnic demographics of the country was enough to create the coveted 'stability'.

The ISIL-War Connection

In Dec. 2011, the Americans ran away from the Iraq inferno, leaving behind a fight that was not yet settled. What is going on in Iraq right now is an integral part of the US-infused mayhem. It should be telling enough that the leader of ISIL, Abu Baker al-Baghdadi is an Iraqi from Samarra, who fought against the Americans and was himself held and tortured in the largest US prison in Iraq, Camp Bucca for five years.

It would not be precise to make the claim that ISIL started in the dungeon of a US prison in Iraq. The ISIL story would need to be examined in greater depth since it is as stretched as the current geography of the conflict, and as mysterious as the masked characters who are blowing people up with no mercy and beheading with no regard to the upright values of the religion they purport to represent. But there can be no denial that the US ignorant orchestration of the mass oppression of Iraqis, and Sunnis in particular during the 2003 war until their much touted withdrawal was a major factor in ISIL formation, and the horrendous levels of violence the extremist group utilizes.

While the Sunni-Shia strife is rooted in over 14 centuries of history, modern Middle Eastern states, with all of its corruption and failures, did manage to neutralize much of the violent manifestation of the historical dispute. The Bush administration had insolently re-centered the conflict into the heart of Arab history. Iran exploited the situation for various reasons for sheer political and territorial interests, coupled with the hope to redeem what many Shias perceive as past injustices.

When al-Qaeda was ostensibly driven out of major Iraqi cities by 2008, they simply regrouped. The Syrian civil war, which started three years ago, created the kind of security vacuum which

allowed them to make their move. But al-Qaeda itself began to splinter, to a ‘central command’, operating via decrees from Afghanistan and Pakistan, an Islamic Front that hosts several al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, and ISIL, which had its own calculations that go beyond Syria.

ISIL believes that the only way to redeem the honor of Muslims is to reestablish the Caliphate, an Islamic state. The heart of that state, as it has historically been is Sham (Levant) and Iraq, thus ISIL’s name.

Redrawing Iraq

It is unclear whether ISIL will be able to hold onto the territories it gained or sustain itself in a battle that involves Shia-controlled Baghdad, Iran and the US. But a few things are also clear:

The systematic political marginalization of Iraq’s Sunni communities is both senseless and unsustainable. A new political and social contract is needed to reorder the mess created by the US invasion, and other foreign intervention in Iraq, including that of Iran.

Violence is a dark and destructive energy force that doesn’t evaporate on its own. The current violence in Iraq is the reverberation of the US and Iraqi violence used against millions of Iraqis who refused to embrace the occupation and accept the status quo. Justice in Iraq should supersede any haphazard reconciliation that merely reinvents the present circumstances.

Iraq was allowed to ache in untold pain for over a decade, which itself followed a decade of an earlier US-led war and sanctions. During all of those years, starting in 1991, the only answer to Iraq’s woes has been nothing but violence, which has consistently generated nothing but more violence. The US must not be allowed to once again determine the future of Iraq.

The nature of the conflict has become so convoluted that a political settlement in Iraq would have to tackle a similar settlement in Syria, which is serving as a breeding ground for brutality, by the Syrian regime and opposition forces, especially ISIL. That factory of radicalization must close down as soon as possible in a way that would allow Syria’s wounds, and by extension Iraq’s, to heal.

Those who insist on the violent options are holding onto the same foolish assumption that violence can ever be a harbinger of lasting peace in the Middle East. Even if ISIL scampers back to Syria or disappears into some other opportune landscape in Iraq itself, the fight will not end without a political settlement that confronts the outcomes of the US war, free of the formula of triumphant Shias and perpetually suppressed Sunnis. In order for Iraq to reunify its fragmented territories, it needs to first unify the very identity of its own citizens, as Iraqis first and foremost.