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Iran and Israel vie in Kurdistan

By Brian M Downing

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The West and key Gulf states are trying to find a political arrangement to bring ground troops to bear on the Islamic State. Clearly, Kurdish troops are one of the most promising options. Though landlocked, Kurdistan's oil resources, militias, and increasing autonomy from Baghdad will make it an important actor in regional politics, especially to Iran and Israel.

For many years, Iran and Israel were allies, each sharing concerns over hostile Sunni Arab states. That partnership gave way to bitter rivalry as Iran became influential in Lebanon and as Israel sought closer ties with Arab states. Israel is trying to halt Iran's nuclear program and encourage regional and ethnic unrest inside Iran. For its part, Iran is backing three foes of Israel - Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Bashar al-Assad government in Syria.

Israel and Iran may have more in common regarding Kurdistan than their leaders realize. History shows common interests in the past; geopolitics show common interests today. The mullahs and the Likud may all be too guided by recent enmity and doctrinaire foreign policy to realize it, though.

Iran

Like Turkey, Iran accepts an independent or highly autonomous Kurdistan as a fait accompli and seeks to cooperate with it rather than see it align with enemies. In recent weeks, Tehran has sent a delegation to Kurdistan's capital Erbil to coordinate security efforts and is thought to have advisers with peshmerga units. Though generally considered adversaries, Iranians and Kurds have worked together in recent years. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), the Kurds tied down several Iraqi divisions that might otherwise have been put into battle against Iran. And the Kurds paid for it by fearsome reprisals from Baghdad, including poison gas attacks.

Tehran has three main concerns. First, the astonishing Islamic State campaign into northern Iraq has presented a sudden and unexpected problem. IS came close to breaking the largely Shia Iraqi army and sending the government fleeing from Baghdad to Basra in the south. IS may yet seize and desecrate Shia holy sites in Samarra, Karbala, and Najaf, which would force direct Iranian intervention and create a broader sectarian war with Sunni states.

IS may also use positions in Iraq to strike into Iran itself, perhaps with a bombing campaign along the lines of the one conducted in Baghdad in recent years. Iran's western cities such as Kermanshah may be the main target, though Tehran itself is only 350 miles (560 kilometers) from IS positions near Tikrit.

Second, Iran will wish to limit Kurdistan's cooperation with the US and Israel - each of whom has had intelligence and special forces officers in Kurdistan for decades. Israel, in conjunction with the Iranian exile group Mujahideen-e-Khalq, has been assassinating Iranian nuclear scientists for several years now and Israel may have plans of taking advantage of rising Kurdish nationalism across the region and inciting Iranian Kurds to break from Tehran.

Third, Iran will seek to prevent the rise of Saudi influence in Kurdistan. In recent years Riyadh has brought Yemen into its fold, replacing a Shia president with a Sunni one, though Iranian-backed Houthis are very much on the rise. Saudi Arabia helped oust the Muslim Brotherhood from power in Egypt and bring an army-centered oligarchy to power, which ended burgeoning ties with Iran. Riyadh can offer financial support to Kurdistan and help find purchasers for the oil it is trying to export from the Turkish port of Ceyhan.

Though short of cash owing to international sanctions, Iran will counter offers from its Sunni rival or risk Kurdistan's alignment with an enemy, instead of simply being an unwelcome neighbor. Iran could be helpful in getting Kurdish oil to markets. Baghdad, angered by Kurdistan's growing distance from it, is closing off southern export routes to Basra.

Iran may be able to prevail upon its fellow Shia government to reverse this. Alternatively, Iran could allow Kurdish oil to flow into its pipeline running from the country's northwest to export terminals on the Gulf. Better that, Iran may reason, than run the risk of Kurdish oil running south to Saudi terminals through a Sunni-Iraqi state backed by the Gulf monarchies.

Israel

Kurdistan has been an important part of Israeli strategy for decades. Israel has supported Kurdish guerrillas in their fight with Iraq, thereby preventing forces from coming to the aid of Syria and Egypt. Israelis and the Kurds have the common experience of long periods as beleaguered,

stateless peoples. Israel wants a strong partner opposed to both Saudi Arabia and Iran - a rarity in a region so polarized along sectarian lines. A strong Kurdistan, perhaps soon aligned with Syrian Kurdistan, would serve as a thorn in Iran's side and a base for covert operations.

Israel has hopes that the fragmentation process taking place in many Middle Eastern countries - Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen - will continue and spread to Iran, where Kurds, Azeris, Balochs, Bachtari, and other peoples live with varying degrees of discomfort under Persian rule. Israel has the strategic vision and intelligence assets to see that the fragmentation process is not decided wholly by forces inside Iran, and a base of operations in Kurdistan would allow Israel to push historical forces along.

Parallel histories of statelessness go only so far in world affairs and Israel brings only a modest amount to the Kurdistan table. It has purchased a consignment of Kurdish oil but it is not a major importer and its own hydrocarbon assets in the Mediterranean are thought to be sufficiently bountiful to make it an exporter in coming years.

Israel provides arms and training, though neither is extensive or irreplaceable. Israel's financial support is limited and while its influence in Washington is considerable, the US is presently opposed to an independent Kurdistan. Israel will likely press Washington on the matter, probably in conjunction with US oil companies operating in Kurdistan.

Iran at present has more to offer than Israel. It has export routes and more money. Israel, then, may be relegated to secondary or tertiary status in Kurdistan's foreign policy. This may be especially so as Washington is reluctant to support another remote, landlocked country so soon after its Afghan venture has led to years of disappointment. Washington, however, may one day feel compelled to further support Kurdistan in order to prevent the rise of Iranian influence there - a point that Israel and Exxon will make clear.

Israel would do well to rethink the prospect of Iran's fragmentation. The scenario depends on worsening fiscal problems for Tehran as sanctions continue and on resultant unrest among non-Persian peoples receiving less money from the capital. Sanctions may ease soon and a rapprochement between Washington and Tehran may be in the offing.

Israel may see advantages to easing enmity with Iran and aligning with Iran, if only loosely, against Saudi Arabia and its cohorts in the Sunni world. That of course would bring the region full circle to the period of Israeli-Iranian cooperation against the Sunni states.