

The ISIS Crisis – Have the Sunnis Unleashed an Uncontrollable Genie?



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ISIS combatants

The sudden, successful attack by the Islamic State Of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) caught many states off-guard.

While international attention has been diverted by the situation in the Ukraine, and to a lesser extent by the internal conflict in Syria, the wealthy Sunni states have been acting quickly and effectively to build a Sunni army made up of extremist militants from around the globe.

ISIS has been growing for the past decade. Initially, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan seemed to welcome the support of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) into the fray of the Syrian civil war.

ISI was originally a group composed of dispossessed Iraqi Sunnis, bolstered by extremist Sunnis from other countries, to seek redress for those have lost family, influence and property as a result of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Many Iraqi Sunnis were forced to flee into Eastern Syria. There they became increasingly radicalized against both the West and the Shi'a branch of Islam, represented in national form by the Government of Iran and, more recently, in the Government of post-2003 Iraq.



Iraqi refugees flee Mosul

When Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan decided to try to unseat the Syrian political regime led by President Bashar Al-Assad, Turkey and others offered full support to ISI and other Sunni Muslim rebel groups with varying agendas.

In the process, an untold amount of arms and funds were provided to shadowy extremists.

It was only early in 2014 that Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan seemed to realize that the ISI fighters would not make good allies in Syria, as it became clear that they included violent extremists. By then, it was too late.



ISI now added another letter “S” for “Sham (meaning “Levant” or “Greater Syria”). ISIS thus became officially a militia-style, angry Islamic fundamentalist group, with a transnational agenda. A monster was maturing.

Turkey Pulled Support for ISIS and other Arab States Stepped Up

While Turkey pulled its support for ISIS in 2014, Gulf Arab states appear to have allowed their citizens to step into the breach and arm and fund ISIS. The goal seems to be to accomplish what the US and the West refused to do: force the Shi’a from power in Syria and Iran while creating a new, credible threat to Israeli expansion into the occupied territories.

Members of ISIS are ready to die for their fundamentalist Sunni beliefs, something that most wealthy Gulf Arab states appreciate but want someone else to actually carry out.

The result is becoming increasingly clear. ISIS militants, armed to the teeth with US military hardware, have mounted a thus successful, brutally violent and cruel attack on the Iraqi city of Mosul and beyond. Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki is begging the US for military assistance which Obama is loath to provide.

Iranian military units are reportedly already deployed within Iraq and may be all that stands between Baghdad surviving or falling to ISIS forces.

ISIS Intends to Spread Conservative Islam

Meanwhile, the Gulf Arab states do not appear to comprehend just how existential a threat ISIS could pose to the monarchies of the Gulf, whom ISIS views as completely corrupt. ISIS will accept Gulf Sunni money for now, but will turn on them as soon as practical.

ISIS first wants to take back Iraq, topple the Iranian regime, topple the Syrian regime and then focus on bringing a more Islamic lifestyle to those Sunni states left standing.

This lifestyle would be unacceptable to most Gulf businessmen and leaders, even in conservative countries like Saudi Arabia, but the Gulf states do not seem to understand the danger ISIS may pose in the long-term.

Shi'a Residents Reportedly Massacred in Iraq

This is one conflict where both Israel and the US can sit back and observe, at least for now. It is flushing out extremists on all sides and, in the short term, this is not seen as a bad thing by outsiders. Similarly, the Gulf Arabs are basking in the glow of victory emanating from the fall of Mosul and the reported massacre of Shi'a residents, and are not looking ahead.

What can be done to avert further disaster?

The first step is to convince the Gulf Sunnis that ISIS is dangerous to them as well as everyone else. This will not be easy. The Gulf Sunnis have lived in fear since the toppling of Saddam in 2003 brought Iran to their borders.

The perceived betrayal by the US suggests that the Gulf Sunnis are not going to trust the US to advise them objectively. Still, as more footage is released of the atrocities committed by ISIS, the Gulf Sunnis may become more open to dialogue.

Military Threat Assessment needs Diplomatic Approach

Diplomatic approach

The second step is to find out precisely how much support has already been provided to ISIS by regional actors so the international community can assess the scope of the military threat.

This is a delicate task. Ensuring the Arabs do not "lose face" for having backed the extremists in ISIS since its inception may be impossible, but unless the Gulf Sunnis address the matter, the supply chain to ISIS of funds and armaments will continue unchecked.

Third, if the Gulf Sunnis can accept that this ISIS monster must be destroyed, the reality that Iran is likely to be part of the effort will be very painful for them to accept.

It is a dangerous proposition for Sunni monarchies to cooperate with Shi'a groups when the Sunnis continue to treat their own Shi'a populations as second-class, unwelcome heretics.

That said, cooperation between Sunni and Shi'a will likely be critical in stopping the spread of the ISIS militia's campaign.



Complexities of a Regional War

For once, this is truly a regional war that the West, East and even Israel can likely watch play out as Sunnis and Shi'a fight each other to the death. Yet from a Western and Israeli perspective ISIS cannot be allowed to actually

win, any more than Iran can be allowed to win.

Still, as long as oil continues to flow, it is unlikely the West will intervene in a meaningful, military manner, even though the civilian casualties are mounting exponentially.

The West would prefer to let Iran bear the burden of fighting ISIS, trusting that eventually the Gulf Sunni states will panic and stop supporting ISIS. Until then, there will likely be a lot of sitting back and observing the conflict unfold.

Clearly, the ISIS genie is out of its bottle and its masters have yet to order it back inside. The question is, do its masters still have the authority to contain it if the situation worsens? At this point, it seems highly doubtful that the key Sunni players in the region are thinking that far ahead.

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