

# **US and Iran security cooperation could help save Iraq**

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Syria and Iraq are spiraling into total chaos and appear headed toward a Somalia-style failed state run by warlords and a haven for extremist terrorist groups. The deep fear, as expressed by US President Barack Obama (<http://time.com/2909114/obama-threat-from-iraq-militants-could-grow/>) June 22, is that the militants that have seized territories in Iraq and Syria, if not confronted, will grow in power. In such an eventuality, logic suggests that the menace may spill over into other countries, not unlike the way Syria's unrest spread into Iraq, destabilizing the whole region.

Another major threat that may emerge from the recent developments is that of the volatile divide between Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq being exploited by terrorists and leading to an all-out sectarian war. The emergence of this scenario would probably lead to Iraq's localized conflict becoming a regional war, dragging in major actors outside Iraq, from states to militia groups.

Obama rejected the idea of sending American troops to Iraq and proposed the employment of a "more targeted strategy" "to partner and train local law enforcement and military to do their jobs as well." In reality, that is what the United States has been doing for the last 10 years at a cost of billions of dollars. So far, this investment and efforts have culminated in Iraqi military forces and the police abandoning Mosul, yielding to the militants that overran Iraq's second-largest city and others in Anbar province.

It is an open secret that the Islamic State group (formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) receives support and financing from individuals in some Arab states in the Persian Gulf (<http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2013/12/06%20private%20gul>

While the highest US officials, including Obama, call the rise of terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq a threat to US national security (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/19/remarks-president-situation-iraq>), this deep mutual security concern can form the pillar of cooperation between Iran and the United States. Together, they

face terrorists who not only have claimed territory but also obtained hundreds of millions of dollars (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/06/12/isis-just-stole-425-million-and-became-the-worlds-richest-terrorist-group/>) in cash from the central bank of Mosul.

Tehran and Washington's common interests on managing the current crisis in Iraq include:

1. Preventing an all-out sectarian war.
2. Opposing the collapse of the post-Saddam Hussein political system in Iraq.
3. Securing the safe passage of oil from the Persian Gulf region.
4. Preventing the breakup of the state system in the Middle East.
5. Avoiding further US military involvement in the Persian Gulf.
6. Keeping oil resources out of the hands of terrorists.
7. Preserving the territorial integrity of Iraq.
8. Forming a more inclusive government to avoid sectarian violence and shape unity against terrorists and insurgents.

## **The way forward**

While Iran and the United States should jointly boost the Iraqi security establishments and military strength, the role of Iran and its cooperation with the United States with regard to the recent crisis in Iraq is key on three fronts.

1. As stated by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., Iran "can play a major role in helping to prevent a major war (<http://time.com/2909114/obama-threat-from-iraq-militants-could-grow/>) between Sunnis and Shiites" by using its influence on the Shiite militants in Iraq.
2. Due to its deep historical ties and influence in Iraq and its familiarity with the intricacies of Iraqi politics and society, Iran can play an instrumental role in building an effective intelligence system in Iraq to track extremist activities and eventually dismantle that system.
3. The crisis in Iraq cannot be brought to an end if Syria's is left unresolved. The two crises are now more intertwined than ever. Many analysts assert that in the absence of an active Iranian role, any initiative to overcome destructive terrorist forces in Syria and re-establish order in that country is doomed to failure. While the Geneva conferences on Syria are clinically dead under the United Nations' supervision, within a fresh framework, Iran can promote and assist the international efforts (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/originals/2014/06/iran-officials-call-action-isis-mosul.html>) to move toward that end.

The Obama administration and the international community should urge all those funding the Islamic State and other terrorist groups to stop. Saudi Arabia should have a vital interest in battling the followers of late al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, inherently enemies of the Saudi government and other Arab monarchies.

Instead, the United States, Iran and Saudi Arabia, in cooperation with and based on joint fatwas by Shiite grand ayatollahs and grand Sunni muftis, can create an alliance under the banner of Islam to both fight extremists and also form a more inclusive government in Iraq. To achieve the latter, winning the current Iraqi government's cooperation is essential, and Iran can help significantly with this.

Last but not least, one tactic employed by the terrorists is to portray their criminal activities as part of the war between Sunnis and Shiites. This tactic has so far helped them in the smooth and resistance-free seizure of cities in Iraq and has also been used effectively for recruiting. To confront this tactic, the terrorists should be separated and distinguished from the majority of the Sunni world, which opposes this barbarism under the name of religion. To that end, instead of terms such as "Sunni militants," the term "takfiris" or simply "terrorists" should be used when referring to them.

Strategically, there are indications that the new US doctrine is to reduce its military presence and avoid any further military involvement in the Middle East while shifting its forces to the Pacific. Iran welcomes this strategy. Subject to resolving the crisis over Iran's nuclear program (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/kerry-iran-nuclear-negotiations-vienna.html>), as the most stable state in the region and a regional power, Iran would stand ready for cooperation with the United States to secure and stabilize the region during and after this transformation. It is essential that the United States and Iran work together on Iraq (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/iraq-crisis-end-iran-us-rouhani-adviser.html>), including direct security cooperation, to prevent the possible collapse of Iraq as a state and a nation.

Read More: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/managing-iraqs-crisis.html>



