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August 15, 2014

Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict

SSPC Opinion / Analysis

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The West and the ISIS: Repercussions on Shia Iran

Ahmad Reza Taheri ¹

The recent violent role of Sunni insurgency in Iraq (2014), no doubt, has different implications for different countries in the region. The purpose of this article, however, is not to discuss all these implications. The capacity of the present article is limited to ISIS ² in Iraq and its implications for Iran.

ISIS and Vested Interests

Although it is said that the ISIS source of assets comes from oil fields, smuggling, seizures, and lootings, evidences also indicate that this group has been benefited financially and militarily from certain agencies in the Gulf States or the West. It is claimed that such support extended to ISIS either directly or indirectly. A recently published report believes that "The British and American intelligence and the Mossad worked together to create the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)." ³

Irrespective of the reliability or unreliability of Western involvement, support to groups like ISIS cannot be repudiated. In fact, it is as a result of foreign support that today ISIS is considered one of the leading Sunni militancy in the Middle

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² "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria", or "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant", also called as "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham".

³ For more see the "ISIS Leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi Trained by Israeli Mossad, NSA Documents Reveal" at globalresearch.ca/isis-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-trained-by-israeli-mossad-nsa-documents-reveal/5391593 (Gulf Daily News, Global Research, 16 July 2014).

East. A source claims "ISIS has assets worth \$2 billion which makes it the richest jihadi group in the world." ⁴

The issue of "Western support to ISIS" is emphasized mainly by the Iranian Islamic state. However, the question of the militants' "independence" is highlighted by some elements associated with Western governments or some Sunni states in the Gulf. Nevertheless one cannot draw a clear-cut distinction between what is referred above, because on this, there is divergence of opinion.

From this, however, it might be presumed that highlighting the issue of "spontaneity of ISIS" and diluting the question of "Western elements" in supporting this Jihadi group sounds like a "deliberate tactic", adopted by "vested interests"⁵ to project ISIS as a "spontaneous movement" rather than a movement dependent on regional or western factors. Probably the intention of such "tactic" is to convey to the peoples and states of the world that no Western agency has hands in the ongoing Sunni militancy in Iraq. Why?

The reason is political. Had not this concept projected in such a manner it would have critically turned circumstances against the interests of the powerful West in the region. It goes without saying that for years and for many it has been taken for granted that Western powers, directly or indirectly, have been behind the politico religious fundamentalism in the Middle East. At times, this has appeared to be more than a theory. Let's take example of Syria where the US, UK, France, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, and Turkey have sent billions of dollars and thousands of tons of weapons into Syria alongside forces from

⁴ Moore, Jack, "Mosul Seized: Jihadis Loot \$429m from City's Central Bank to Make ISIS World's Richest Terror Force", *International Business Times* (11 June 2014, UK).

⁵ In this context "vested-interests" is referred to those who take interest from the ongoing conflicts between Sunni and Shia in the Middle East. These groups, for example, can be some powerful politico economic institutions or secret agencies from the West, Saudi Arabia, and Israel.

Libya, Chechnya, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq.⁶ States such as Iran strongly believe in Western conspiracy. Iran holds that "Conspirators are behind the scenes, dividing Sunni and Shia and ruling over the Middle East." Right or wrong, whatever, this mentality exists in the mind-set of many in the East. Thus, this established mentality, most likely has stimulated the "vested-interests" to react and deliberately disregard or diminish "Western support to ISIS", to protect their political and economic interests.

Whether such tactic on the part of the vested-interests can work out or not is another issue which is beyond the purview of the present article. In this text, however, this much is sufficient to note that one of the main [future] targets of such politico religious militancy as ISIS in Iraq can be the Shia state in Iran. So, any active role of Sunni militancy in the neighborhood can have repercussions on Shia in Iran. Some of these repercussions are discussed in the following manner.

Decentralizing Iran's Influence

Because of the threatening role of ISIS in Iraq, Iran will be forced to deploy more intelligent and military forces in today's chaotic Iraq; to preserve its political and ideological interest. Therefore, its concentration will be far more divided both in Syria and Iraq. Thus, in case of lesser Iranian involvement in Syria easier it can be for the West and some regional states to extent their support to the factions fighting against Bashar Asad. Noting this, in such context, the most will be that the Asad's likely fall in Syria shall be counted as a major blow to Iran. Although for the time being (July 2014) there is no substantial sign of the Asad's withdrawal, one of the strategies is to continue the

⁶ For more on the issue see the following sources. 1) "US and Europe in major Airlift of Arms to Syrian Rebels through Zagreb" (02 July 2014), *The Telegraph*: telegraph.co.uk. 2) M. R. Gordon & S. Arsu, "Kerry Says U.S. will Double Aid to Rebels in Syria" (20 April 2013), *New York Times*: nytimes.com. 3) L. Sly, "U.S. Feeds Syrians, but Secretly" (14 April 2013), *The Washington Post*: washingtonpost.com

task of overthrowing Asad in Syria. This, if happens, will ultimately decentralize or weaken the Iranian involvement not only in Syria but also in Iraq.

Manipulating Iran-US Relations

Both Israel and Saudi Arabia have shown their strong dissatisfaction or criticism over the recent (2014) talks between US and Iran on Iran's nuclear issue. The Israelis have tried to dissuade the US authorities from holding meetings with the Iranians. However, to this date (2014), they have failed to effectively exercise their influence over the Americans. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has ideological differences with Iran. It looks upon Iran as a powerful rival in the region. If one is to consider Saudi Arabia as a country representing "Sunni Islam", one has to regard the Islamic Republic of Iran as a country representing "Shia Islam." There has been politico religious rivalry between these two states. Such rivalry at times has come into light in case of each supporting politico religious factions in South East Asia and Middle East.

After the revolution of 1979 in Iran, the Iran-US relations deteriorated and the two sides till recent months (in 2014) have not enjoyed formal diplomatic contacts. However, both Israelis and Saudis have been benefiting from their relations with the US. But, what is important in this particular context is that in case of any friendly relations between US and Iran, the relations between US and Saudi Arabia and between US and Israel, probably will be undermined. The opinion on the part of some radical Israelis and Saudis is that with a likely arrival of Iran into this "US circle" their positions will be challenged by the Iran-US ties. Therefore, in order to sabotage the Iran-US relations, these states can use Sunni militancy (ISIS) and apply it as a tool against the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Apparently ISIS emerged in Syria and Iraq to defend the rights of the so-called unprivileged. But, rationally speaking, more than anything else, ISIS can benefit the vested-interests in the Middle East. By turning Syria and Iraq into chaos ISIS, knowingly or unknowingly, prepares the grounds for western and regional intervention. As a result, these disturbed neighbors can jeopardize the peace and security at Iran's boundary areas. This instinctively pushes Iran to play its own role in the neighborhood's disorder. Probably this is what some western or regional secret agencies want Iran to be involved with. Thus, an Iranian involvement may be interpreted as an Iranian intervention in the affairs of Syria and Iraq. This can help to disrupt the ongoing Iran-US diplomatic relations.

Destabilizing Shia Theocracy

Compared to the neighboring semi-stable or unstable states like Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, Islamic Republic of Iran still considered stable. But, such stability is subjected to threat. This menace appears in different shapes. Presently, ISIS is one of such shapes. Iran's boundary areas are populated by a great deal of ethno religious minorities, mainly the Sunni. These places often have been regarded as easy targets for politico religious manipulation against the Iranian central government. The gist of the issue is that the ongoing Sunni-Shia conflicts in Syria and Iraq, and the Iranian share in such fights, might someday provoke the Iranian Sunni against their own central government. It should not be neglected that regional or western support to Sunni militancy in Iran is not a new phenomenon.⁷ Thus, destabilizing the Shia theocracy from within is one of the goals of the vested-interests.

⁷ For example, on the issue of Jundollah's foreign support, The Times of India had published a report in which Alexis Debat (a senior fellow on counter-terrorism at the Nixon Center) had said that: "According to ABC News citing unnamed US and Pakistani intelligence sources, Jundollah was secretly encouraged and advised by American officials. The Pakistani government sources confirmed that the secret campaign against Iran by Jundollah was on the agenda when Dick Cheney met with Parviz Musharaf... Washington was using Pakistan in its campaign against Iran. The report further says that US provides no direct funds to the group, which would require an official presidential order, instead money is funneled to Jundollah's leader through Iranian exiles with

Sunni-Shia Project

Whether it is a Western conspiracy or not many in the Muslim world believe that the "Sunni-Shia conflict" in the Middle East is a project which long ago was designed by the British or American secret networks. The Iraqi Shia [religious] leaders and the Iranian authorities have constantly accused some of the Western agencies (MI6 and CIA) and the Gulf States (Saudi Arabia and Qatar) in supporting the Sunni militancy against the Shia.

As a matter of fact, the question of Western support to both Shia and Sunni if today cannot be substantiated, it may not be denied too. Perhaps one of the obvious signs of such intentional or unintentional support can be sensed at the media. In recent years (2006-14) for instance, the active role of some satellite programs (dish televisions) belonging to both Shia and Sunni activists, often broadcasting against each other's beliefs from the United Kingdom, United States, and United Arab Emirates cannot be overlooked.

Today, ISIS can be regarded as one of the most extreme forms of Islamic militancy which has caused remarkable division between Sunni and Shia in the Middle East. As ISIS is calling to exterminate the Shia, to the same extent, the Islamic Republic of Iran wishes to eliminate ISIS. Hence, in case of a war between Iran and ISIS, Iran will be faced with resistance from the supporters of ISIS such as certain elements in the Gulf States, for example. Put differently, any attack on Shia subjects can be considered an attack on Shia state in Iran and the same can be the case with Sunni subjects and Sunni states in the region. This scenario causes one to remember the old phrase of "divide and rule policy."

connections in Europe and Gulf States." *The Times of India* (Thursday, 05 April 2007, p.16). Similar reports more or less have been disclosed by some Iranian Baloch insurgents on provincial TV (Hamoon, Sistan va Balochestan of Iran) during their confessions (2005-14). These insurgents have confessed about their activities while they were under police detention in Iran.

Regrettably, it is to be noted, the "Sunni-Shia conflict" will be doomed to continue in the Middle East, principally because it has politico economic and ideological advantage for the vested interests. The Islamic Republic of Iran, willy-nilly, has to remain as one face of the conflict.

Concluding Remarks

Thus, conflicts between Sunni and Shia to weaken the influence of Shia ideology in the region, destabilizing the Shia state in Iran from within, undermining the ongoing relatively positive Iran-US ties, and engaging Iran in Iraq to decentralize its influence and power in the Middle East, are serious repercussions for the Islamic Republic of Iran. One of the major sources responsible for such repercussions is "Sunni militancy", today in the form of ISIS and tomorrow it may be in some other form.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a major target. Targeting Iran generally has been resulted from two factors. First, to this date, Iran has been reluctant to abide by the commands of the powerful West, thus for such disobedience the powerful West intends to punish the Islamic state. Second, whosoever which controls Middle East can also have a powerful role and a strong voice in international politics. Since Iran can exercise influence over some states in the Middle East its presence therefore can be viewed as a barrier to the interests of western powers and regional states such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. A destabilized Iran, no doubt, can benefit both the western and regional players in the Middle East.