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Syria-Iraq

LIMITING IRANIAN INFLUENCE IMPLIES RETURNING TO REALPOLITIK

FABRICE BALANCHE

Since its January 2015 defeat by the Syrian Democratic Forces in Kobane, the Islamic State has continued to steadily lose territory. Before losing Kobane, the Islamic State was at the peak of its power. Areas under its control stretched over 240,000 square kilometers, the equivalent of the United Kingdom, an area of about eight to ten million inhabitants (three-quarters of whom were in Iraq). In September 2017, its control decreased to 2 million, and the area of its territory to 70,000 square kilometers. However, this territory is essentially desert. The population is concentrated in the valleys of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, while the rest of the area under Islamic State control is a sparsely populated steppe.

The Islamic State flourished because local and regional actors underestimated its strength and because some of them found their interests aligned with those of the Islamic State (IS). But by June 2014, they realized that they had been playing with fire. As the United States, Russia, Iran, the Gulf countries, the Syrian and Iraqi armies, the Shiite militias, the Kurdish militias, Hezbollah, and, finally, Turkey, all joined in campaigns against the Islamic State, its territory has been dramatically reduced. If these parties remain united in pursuing a common objective, the goal of defeating the Islamic State could be realized in 2017. There remain, however, significant tensions between the various parties to both the Syrian and the Iraqi conflicts because the wider agendas beyond defeating the Islamic State are not compatible. It is important to bear in mind that the return of the governments of Baghdad and Damascus to the areas occupied by the Islamic State also means the arrival of Iran and thus a realization of the pro-Iranian axis, or “Shiite Crescent,” from Tehran to Beirut.

As is apparent from his rhetoric, the new US president is eager to finish off the Islamic State. In February 2017, Donald Trump stated that it would be expelled from Mosul and Raqqa within six months. The Islamic State would thus lose its two main urban bastions. Its fighters would be forced to take refuge in the immense Syria-Iraq steppe. From this ungovernable area, the fighters will always be able to launch raids on settled



areas, but the Islamic State will have lost its power to attract foreign recruits and would atrophy from a lack of financial resources. However, does the military defeat of the Islamic State also mean its political and ideological defeat? We know the main root causes that led to its rise: regional Sunni frustration, in addition to the advance of the Kurds in Iraq, on the one hand, and, on the other, the rejection by the Sunnis of eastern Syria of the Bashar al-Assad regime, which had historically marginalized them. However, Baghdad and Damascus don't appear to have planned to address the local dynamics that would prevent the return of the Islamic State or its specter in the long term.

A federal solution is regularly discussed for both Iraq and Syria. But the model faces opposition from Iran as well as from the Syrian and Iraqi governments. (Even the Syrian opposition has no desire to see a federal system.) They all think that behind this Western proposal is a project to partition Syria and Iraq, which they regard as unacceptable. The idea is especially anathema for Iran, as the creation of Kurdish and Sunni Arab ministates under American protection would mean the end of the Iranian corridor project. The geopolitical stakes go beyond the mere struggle against Islamic terrorism. The search for a solution that leads to its eradication without strengthening Iran's presence in the region is complicated. This search requires understanding the demands of the local populations, the agendas of the various regional actors, and the need for Western countries to know if they have the means to pursue their ambitions. In this essay, I will focus on the situation of the Islamic State in Syria. (It is necessary to avoid conflating Syria and Iraq and especially important for the United States to refrain from approaching the Islamic State in Syria on the basis of its Iraqi experience.)

The Islamic State has become entrenched in the population

In Iraq, the frustration of the Sunni Arab population has benefited the Islamic State. In June 2014, in the Sunni areas, there was an agreement among jihadists, local notables, tribes, and former Baathists to push out the Iraqi army, which they understood to be a pro-Shia and pro-Iranian entity.¹ The resentment of the Iraqi Sunni Arabs is twofold. They feel marginalized by the government in Baghdad, whose policy increasingly represents Shiite interests. And they have also watched with disbelief the birth of a Kurdish state that lays claim to parts of their own territory. This context was enough to allow the Islamic State to portray itself as a liberator in the north and west of Iraq. The problem is different in Syria, where the Islamic State emerged under the cover of the al-Nusra Front and Syrian jihadists. Syrian IS fighters took advantage of the uprising

against Bashar al-Assad to return home after several years spent in Iraq. This is the case of the head of the al-Nusra Front, Mohamed al-Julani, who went to Iraq to fight the US military in 2003. In January 2012, he founded al-Nusra Front in Iraq with the support of Mohamed al-Baghdadi. But a split emerged in April 2013, when al-Baghdadi decided to merge al-Nusra Front with the Islamic State (only present in Iraq at that time) as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Ayman al-Zawahiri tried to defuse the crisis by making al-Nusra Front his only representative in Syria and asking al-Baghdadi to settle for Iraq. But this only led to the break between al-Baghdadi and al-Qaeda.

The al-Nusra Front, despite being weakened by the break with ISIL, was able to regain its strength and take the lead of a rebel coalition against ISIL. During the winter of 2013–14, a war broke out between the two jihadist groups and ended with the division of jihadist-controlled Syrian territory. The Islamic State has unlimited control over a large area from east Aleppo to the Iraqi border, with the exception of Kurdish areas. In western Syria, the Islamic State controls some pockets of territory via groups pledging allegiance to it, such as Qalamun, in the Yarmouk district of Damascus, or on the Israeli-Jordan border (Liwa Shouada al-Yarmouk).² But the Islamic State's composition of mainly foreign fighters, its brutality, and its willingness to impose strict sharia law are repulsive factors in western Syria. In the East, Syrian society is closer to that of Iraq and the low level of development makes the population more permeable to IS discourse and propaganda.³ The creation of a Kurdish entity in the North, led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), has pushed the Arab tribes of the Euphrates valley toward the Islamic State. What essentially distinguishes this region from western Syria is the permanence of tribal structures in the society, which the Islamic State knows how to manipulate.

Eastern Syria is dominated by tribalism

In northeastern Syria, tribal structures remained powerful.⁴ The tribes are sedentary or semisedentary, as the nomadic way of life has disappeared. The tribe (*ashira*) constitutes a network of solidarity of several thousand or tens of thousands of members who refer to a common or supposed ancestor. It is subdivided into clans. Each clan (*shabba*) corresponds to a few hundred individuals from the same lineage, whose common ancestor dates back as far as five generations. The clans compete with each other for the control of the tribe and the land, but they are unified against external danger. At the higher level, the large tribal federations (*qabyala*)—Shammar, Anaze, and Baggarah—can count several million members, but they no longer have any concrete coherence in Syria. The tribes, however, keep the memory of a time when



their ancestors, perched on their camels, were powerful enough to refuse to pay taxes to the Ottomans. This confers on the descendants of the large tribal confederations the title of “noble tribe.” The others—shepherds or tribes already working in agriculture in the nineteenth century—acquiesced to the taxes and thus are only “common” tribes.

The Shammar and Anaze tribes came from the Nejd to Syria and Iraq in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They remain transnational and maintain links with Saudi Arabia. The common tribes, on the other hand, are more anchored in Syrian territory and integrated into the state. From the beginning of the uprising in Syria, those who had a connection with Saudi Arabia immediately took part in the protest against the Bashar al-Assad regime, which explains the rapid shift of the province of Deir Al Zour to the opposition. The province of Raqqa remained loyal longer because the common tribes are more numerous and still feel a certain animosity toward the nobles who dominated them for centuries. The common tribes also benefited more from the agrarian reform and the Euphrates development project launched by the Baathist regime after its takeover of Syria in 1963.

Hafez al-Assad’s co-option of the tribal elites

In the 1960s, the Baathist regime in Damascus was hostile to the heads of the large tribal confederations. It confiscated their land in the agrarian reforms, even as those who had pledged allegiance to the regime were spared. The main sheikhs then left Syria for Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The secondary tribal leaders, who chose to stay in Syria, as well as the smaller non-noble tribes, were eventually integrated into the structures of the Baathist State. Hafez al-Assad sought to co-opt the traditional elites with his regime and not to destroy them.

The construction of the large dam on the Euphrates River, the Thawra dam, and the extensive irrigation system that accompanied it allowed the Baathist regime to patronize the tribal elites. At the same time, in developing the bureaucracy the regime could offer the more-educated sons of tribal leaders government job opportunities and enable them to enrich themselves through the distribution of irrigated land.⁵ Thanks to political power acquired from the state, this new generation of tribal leaders also imposed itself in traditional structures and developed an allegiance to the Baathist regime. But at the end, this new generation of administrative staff/tribal sheikhs works less for the general interest than for the interest of the tribe because its aim is to use the resources of the state to maintain itself at the head of the tribe. The first consequence has been the abject failure of the Euphrates valley irrigation program,

as local political interests have taken precedence over development. These interests created tensions: a rapidly growing local population (with a doubling of the population every twenty years) requires an extension of irrigation, but the project has been paralyzed by bureaucracy and its high cost.⁶ The rapid promotion of an alternative tribal hierarchy, in contradiction to the traditional tribal system, created tensions and contributed to the political shift toward the opposition of those left behind, especially the noble tribes marginalized by the al-Assad regime.

Although the Euphrates River project was not an economic success, it allowed the state to buy tribal allegiances. However, under Bashar al-Assad, the regime reverted to relying on traditional tribal structures. Al-Assad's cancellation of part of the agrarian reform law of 1963 deeply upset the generally rural population of northeastern Syria. Even though the Raqqa region remained loyal to the regime until March 2013, it too eventually turned. The destabilization of the regime and the flow of Gulf states' money have tipped the heads of tribes toward the opposition. Those who remained loyal resettled in Damascus. The regime protects them, hoping to use them to prepare for its return to the Euphrates valley.

Islamic state integration of tribes through blood and marriage

As soon as it arrived in eastern Syria, the Islamic State integrated the tribes into its political system. Having fully learned the lessons of the counterinsurgency led by American general Petraeus in Iraq, which relied on the cooperation of Sunni tribes, the Islamic State obliged tribal chiefs to pledge allegiance to it. But it was not content with simple oaths. Tribal leaders were invited to marry their daughters to IS fighters and the sons were enlisted in the troops. The Islamic State distributed material benefits, including the use of oil wells and irrigated land, to those who joined voluntarily. Those who resisted were dealt with brutally, as was the case in August 2014 of the Sheitat tribe, seven hundred of whose members were massacred by the Islamic State.

The Islamic State also exploits intra-tribal conflicts to impose itself, as in Jarabulus, where it militarily supported the Tayy tribe against the Jays tribe, which had to leave the city and seek refuge in Turkey as a result. In exchange, the Tayy provided fighters to the Islamic State. Similarly, in northern Syria, the Islamic State leveraged the conflict between Kurds and Arabs to gain Arab support. In August 2013, it supported Arab tribes of Tal Abyad against the PYD, which had just occupied the city. The Kurdish minority was expelled from the city and the wider district, Kurdish villages were



destroyed, and Kurdish lands redistributed to the Arab tribes. Next, the Islamic State wanted to seize Kobane and Hassakeh in order to win the sympathy of the local Sunni Arab populations who fear Kurdish irredentism. The hatred that the Islamic State feels toward the Kurds is explained by its experience with Kurdish expansionism in Iraq.

At the same time, the Islamic State is trying to build a social base independent from traditional tribal hierarchies. When the sheikhs resist, the Islamic State favors the rise of a competitor or a secondary clan within the same tribe. But its most intense efforts are directed toward teenagers, more malleable than adults. Teens are drawn into training camps where they undergo intense ideological and military training. Since 2013, the Islamic State has trained thousands of teenagers, who have become ultraradicalized, now ready to go as far as suicide bombing for the triumph of the caliphate. This gives the Islamic State a major advantage in the current conflict. These teenagers will continue to pose a serious threat and require extensive rehabilitation even after the group is defeated. In Iraq, there are no dedicated measures to de-radicalize minors who have entered the service of the Islamic State—they are jailed with adult members.

Local populations now reject the Islamic State

For the Islamic State to be destroyed, the international coalition needs the help of the local population. The deterioration of the economic situation, repression, and loss of credit are the three factors that will turn the population against the Islamic State. As for tribal hierarchies, material advantages, political positions, and judicial immunities are indispensable in obtaining their cooperation. It must be remembered that a tribe is never for sale but simply for rent and works solely in its own interest.

At first, the Islamic State generously distributed food to the population by emptying the state's grain silos. The price of bread was cheaper in Raqqa than in the rest of Syria. Fuel was also cheap because it was produced and refined on site. The Islamic State also exercised very strict price controls to limit inflation. Over time, it has not been able to halt a rise in prices, especially as local agricultural production decreases due to lack of fertilizers and pesticides. Farmers are increasingly taxed by the Islamic State, which must compensate for its lack of external resources and a decline in oil revenues. The irrigation system is much less efficient due to the destruction of infrastructure and management problems. Farmers in irrigated areas complain that they now face the same constraints of compulsory production as during the Baathist period, but with a declining income.

The myth of an Islamic order that restores justice among the faithful has vanished. The Islamic courts of justice are just as corrupt as the courts of the Baathist era. The members of the Islamic State and their family members are always winners. Some high-profile executions of corrupt fighters are highlighted to try to prove the opposite, but the population no longer has any illusions about the group's nature. The conscription and recruitment of adolescents has provoked protests, as in Manbij in November 2015, which were repressed harshly to avoid contagion. The adhesion of the population is no longer self-evident, and the terrorist group is obliged to increase its repression, at the risk of alienating the tribes of the victims. The desire for revenge (*intiqam*) has increased and pushes individuals and entire clans to join anti-IS forces, whether the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) or the Syrian army. Tribe members have followed up on vows for revenge. After the Sheitat massacre, two hundred members of the tribe joined the Syrian army in Deir Al Zour to fight the Islamic State.⁷ It was thanks to the collaboration of tribes of the Badya of Salamyah that the Syrian army was able to retake Palmyra in March 2016. As the Syrian army and SDF approached from Raqqa, Deir Al Zour, and Manbij, defectors jumped on the tribal bandwagon out of self-interest.

The Syrian regime and the SDF are wooing the tribes

Various Arab tribes have joined the PYD in the framework of the SDF. In Hassakeh, several Shammar tribes joined the PYD fight against the Islamic State and participated in the capture of Hol and Shadadeh in 2016. These tribes have always had good relations with the Kurds and refused to participate in the regime's repression of the Kurdish uprising in 2004. American support to the PYD is essential in recruiting the Arab tribes to the SDF. They need to be given substantial support to confront the Islamic State—above all, air support because that is what makes the difference on the ground, as the example of Kobane proves.

The Arab tribes also rely on the influence of the United States to moderate the authoritarian tendencies of the PYD and guarantee their participation in the post-IS power structure. However, in northern Raqqa, some Arab tribes have remained fiercely pro-IS because they have benefited from its support against the Kurds and other tribes' Arabs. Recent SDF successes in Raqqa Province may be influencing their calculus: in January 2017, the SDF seized more than three thousand square kilometers west of Raqqa, approaching within thirty kilometers of the city and threatening the Thawra dam. In February 2017, SDF fighters nearly completed the encirclement of the city from the east. The international coalition destroyed the two bridges connecting Raqqa to the



southern shore of the Euphrates: the Syrian capital of the Islamic State was completely surrounded in March 2017.⁸ Probably due to the changing situation on the ground, the number of Arab fighters joining the SDF is increasing. In December 2016, the SDF had 45,000 fighters, including 13,000 Arabs, compared with only 5,000 Arabs out of 30,000 combatants at the group's creation in October 2015.⁹ The majority of the new recruits, therefore, are Arab fighters, which should facilitate the progress of the SDF in the Euphrates valley, where 99 percent of the population is Arab.

The Bashar al-Assad regime, on the other hand, has not remained inactive vis-à-vis the tribes of the Euphrates valley. It has based its strategy on the ancient ties of allegiance that have united the tribes to the al-Assad family since 1970, when Hafez al-Assad took power in Syria. In autumn 2012, during the Eid feast, Bashar al-Assad came to Raqqa to confirm the loyalty of the local tribes. While the countryside of Aleppo and Deir Al Zour had already escaped his grasp, and the Kurds had seized the province of Hassakeh, Raqqa Province remained faithful to the regime. The situation was completely changed by March 2013, when a rebel coalition led by the al-Nusra Front (which included the members of the future Islamic State) seized Raqqa. Some of the tribal chiefs then took refuge in Damascus, while others pledged allegiance to the new masters of the city.

Since the reversal of the military and diplomatic situation in the regime's favor, tribal rallies to the regime have increased. In January 2017, Nawaf al-Bashir, leader of the tribal confederation of the Bagarat, left Turkey (where he had been living since 2012) for Damascus. It is clear that Bashar al-Assad and his allies offered him an important political position in postwar Syria in exchange for his support.

The government of Damascus is preparing its military comeback. In June 2016, taking advantage of the SDF offensive against Manbij, the Syrian army tried without success to retake the military base of Tabqa, which it probably would have followed with an attempt to seize the Thawra dam. This dam is indispensable to the economy of the area because it provides irrigation water for all of the southern province of Raqqa and electricity for the whole Euphrates valley.¹⁰

As a further proof of its determination to regain control of the eastern part of the country, the regime has fiercely defended its holdout enclave in Deir Al Zour, which is surrounded by Islamic State forces. The road between Deir Al Zour and Palmyra has been cut since May 2015. An increasingly precarious airlift supplies the population

and the garrison, while elite troops have been sent regularly to Deir Al Zour to support the local garrison, as in January 2017, when Hezbollah fighters were helicoptered there, highlighting the gravity of the situation on the ground. But above all, the importance of this city for the regime is its ability to recruit allies—the regime must maintain a presence at Deir Al Zour at all costs if it wishes to attract the local tribes.

Unable to retake Islamic State territory given his lack of military forces, Bashar al-Assad seems to be waiting until post-IS instability makes the regime the last-resort source of stability, even if he has to allow a certain degree of autonomy to the local chiefdoms. He may be taking his cues from the Ramzan Kadyrov model in Chechnya, the brainchild of Vladimir Putin. The chief of the Bagarats, Nawaf al-Bashir, could thus become a small local potentate under the tutelage of Damascus.

Avoiding a post-IS outbreak of intertribal violence

After the departure of the Islamic State, governance will be a serious problem. In Iraq, the government in Baghdad has been able to return liberated territories to its administrative control because the Iraqi army and the Shiite militias hold the territory once it is secured. There are hot spots contested with the Kurds, as in Touzkhurmatu, divided between Turkmen and Kurds, and notably Kirkuk, which came under Kurdish control in June 2014.¹¹ The experience of local government in Manbij, a city liberated by the Kurds but administered by local Arab notables, seems to have held up so far. The question is: Is the Manbij model replicable? The PYD extols the merits of its self-administration system in the territories under its control, affirming that the Arab population is satisfied.¹² This seems plausible, as the system parallels the local social organization based on clan and tribe. However, this can only work within the framework of a simple economy based on agriculture and basic services. Finally, if the local populations are in charge of basic municipal affairs, the PYD has confiscated the real political power and does not authorize any political competition. The PYD appoints unelected local councils. The military council, itself dominated by the People's Protection Units (YPG), controls the council's decisions.

The PYD, it should be noted, will not be able to reproduce its administrative experience of Hassakeh and Kobane in Raqqa or Deir Al Zour. In Tel Abyad, a town with an Arab majority, the PYD has been accused by Amnesty International of having carried out ethnic cleansing to strengthen its power.¹³ Can the Arab tribes themselves organize a power-sharing model for the Euphrates valley? There is a risk of tribal war for the



control of the city, land, water, and, especially, the Thawra dam. In this pessimistic scenario, we could see the short-term return of the Islamic State or its next incarnation. Finally, the problem of revenge will soon arise. The extreme violence in Syria since 2011 has inevitably included many intertribal killings for which traditional tribal regulatory processes are insufficient. There is a risk of intertribal violence spreading in the absence of strong authority. Some clans and tribes will have to flee to avoid collective vengeance. In this scenario, the Bashar al-Assad regime would represent an option to impose stability on the region, as it did with the international community's assent in Lebanon in 1990.

De facto federalism is possible

The Sunni Arab region in northern and western Iraq has few hydrocarbon resources. In the event of political autonomy, it would be impoverished, deprived of state financial transfers. On the other hand, eastern Syria has the bulk of the country's hydrocarbon reserves, although Syrian resources are low compared to those of Iraq. That said, the few hundred thousand barrels a day that could be produced and conserved by any "eastern Syria authority" would be sufficient to strengthen its political autonomy. This is also why Damascus will refuse to separate from the area: it is indispensable for the economic independence of the country.¹⁴ The concept of a union between eastern Syria with the Sunni Arab Iraqi region, with the aim of creating an Arab Sunistan from Mosul to Raqqa, is sometimes mentioned.¹⁵ This would have the advantage of addressing the financial hardships of the Iraqi Sunni Arabs. It would ultimately lead to the continuation of the Islamic State territorial project, in the hopes that this would solve the political problem of the Iraqi Sunni Arabs. But it is unlikely that eastern Syria's Sunni Arabs would welcome this idea. Additionally, the international community is hostile to any change in borders.

Is federalism more likely to be accepted? In the Middle East, only the Kurds and, possibly, the Saudis—if it prevents a Shiite crescent—are in favor of a federal solution. But the balance of power is not in their favor. The governments of Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey are opposed to this project, believing that federalism will ultimately lead to partition. The caricature map developed by Ralph Peters, in which every ethnic and religious group has a state, remains in the minds of all in the Middle East.¹⁶ It convinces them that federation means anything but partition; federalism is only fully feasible in politically advanced societies, which is not the case in Syria and Iraq. Iran and Turkey are also strongly opposed to this solution, as this could encourage their own national minorities to demand this form of governance.

Iran is, of course, the most suspicious, since ethnic Persians are only 50 percent of Iran's population due to their low fertility rate. If the demographic trend does not change, Baluchis, Arabs, Kurds, and Azeris will be 60 percent of the Iranian population by 2040. This concerns the authorities because the Shiite cement that unites Azeris and Persians could crack in the face of ethnic fissures. The declining fertility rate is the marker of a mental evolution in society, as the population becomes more individualistic and more secular.¹⁷ If Shiism weakens in Iran, then the authorities must find a new factor of national unity: the Islamic Revolution and the war against Iraq will lose their power to mobilize. Ethnic cleavages are therefore likely to assert themselves, especially if Syria and Iraq are divided. Turkey shares the same fears as Iran, although the Turkish Sunni majority is not experiencing the same demographic decline as the Persians.

Russia is more comfortable with federalism. The USSR was a federation, too. "All peoples of the Soviet Union are brothers, but the Russian people is the oldest," according to Stalin's reputed formula. This formula expresses quite well how the Soviet leaders conceived federalism. Stalin was a master in the art of creating autonomous republics within the various republics, with the aim of maintaining leverage over local leaders. Vladimir Putin has followed the example of Stalin, the "Little Father of the Peoples," to neutralize Ukraine and Georgia. Russia supports the autonomous "claims" of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Adjara, with the aim of weakening Tbilisi. Autonomous republics in the Donbass would be an excellent means of making Ukraine ungovernable. In Syria, Putin may be in favor of local autonomies in the east and north of the country, which may be a good compromise with the opponents of Bashar al-Assad and which may eventually hasten the end of the conflict. Moreover, local autonomies guaranteed by Moscow would give Putin permanent leverage over the Syrian government and Iran. The Iran-Russia alliance seems to be sustainable in the Middle East because it goes beyond Syria.¹⁸ To avoid being reduced to the control of only two military bases in Latakia and Tartus in a post-conflict Syria controlled by al-Assad, Putin could be well served by extracting long-term pledges of allegiance from the Kurds and Arab tribes once the regime of Bashar al-Assad has stabilized.

Therefore, while a partition of Syria and Iraq seems unlikely, an informal "federal" solution could emerge. Baghdad and Damascus will not accept a federal institutional system but will recognize de facto autonomy that could be cancelled later. Moreover, an ambiguous and unstable situation allows Baghdad and Damascus to play the role of referee between the different local factions. As for Tehran and Moscow, they are



accustomed to this kind of wobbly and temporary situation. Western countries prefer Westphalian solutions, which could stabilize the region. But without a significant military weight, their views will not be taken into account. It is significant that talks in Astana, Kazakhstan—where the triumvirate of Russia, Iran, and Turkey manages the Syrian conflict—is challenging the Western-backed Geneva process.¹⁹ Under these conditions, how could the United States and its allies capitalize on their military investment against the Islamic State without benefiting Iran and Russia? In my opinion, it is illusory to think that it is possible to separate Iran and Russia. That is why the West should counter them using the same rules and tools.

Syria: Supporting Kurd and Arab tribal autonomy

Unlike the situation in Iraq, the Sunni Arab population of the Syrian part of the Euphrates valley does not have the specter of Shiite militias or a national army composed primarily of Shiites occupying the region. In fact, the Syrian army has more Sunni soldiers than Alawis (members of Bashar al-Assad's sect).²⁰ Iraqi Shiite militias and Hezbollah are deployed only on specific fronts in Aleppo and around Damascus and would not be used to control a rural Sunni area, as this would be a mistake. The possibility of a durable return of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in the east of the country using Sunni troops is very real. Nevertheless, the primary fear of the inhabitants of the Euphrates valley is of Kurdish militias taking control of the area. However, the PYD has no reason to incorporate this Arab region into its zone of self-administration. Thus the Arab tribes, despite their enmity toward the PYD and the Kurds in general, know that power will eventually return to them once the Islamic State is defeated. This is probably the Kurds' strategy for Raqqa: in allowing Arab tribes to liberate "themselves" from the Islamic State, they are simultaneously giving them a taste for political independence and drawing them toward their plan for a federal Syria. The objective is to prevent the return of the Syrian army to this area. The Kurdish campaign for Raqqa will also relieve the beleaguered Syrian army garrison of Deir Al Zour.

If the United States really wants to prevent the pro-Iranian government in Damascus from returning to eastern Syria, it has no alternative but to give the SDF its unreserved support. Of course, the SDF is under the control of the PYD, an offshoot of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), but it is the United States' only effective ally in Syria against the Islamic State. Turkey's debacle in taking the Syrian town of Al Bab proved that the pro-Turkish rebels are not motivated in fighting the Islamic State.²¹ Turkey's hostility to the PYD may lead it to work more closely with Russia, if the United States does not protect it. It would be in Putin's interest for Turkey to attack the SDF to break

the SDF-US alliance, although he does not want the PYD to disappear completely—it was only because of the group that Turkey and Russia's rapprochement on Syria occurred.

It should be remembered that in September 2015, Putin proposed that the PYD work with him in Syria in exchange for recognition of Rojava, a de facto autonomous region in northern Syria.²² However, the Kurds refused, preferring to maintain their alliance with the United States, a partner deemed more reliable to build Rojava. The PYD has maintained a certain degree of ambiguity since it cooperated with the Syrian army in the capture of east Aleppo and, prior to the August 2016 Turkish-Russian agreement, benefited in Afrin canton from the support of Russian aviation against Turkish-backed rebels.²³ If the United States does not strongly support the PYD, especially against Turkey, the PYD will always find an open door in Moscow.

By recruiting auxiliaries to the SDF, the United States can organize a local Arab force in the Euphrates valley, which can drive out the Islamic State and take control of the region. Thus, the Arab tribes will get a taste of self-determination. It will then be necessary to be able to help them to set up local governance, complicating the return of the regime to the area. However, Bashar al-Assad needs eastern Syria for its hydrocarbon reserves, essential to the country's economic independence. If the al-Assad regime does not impose itself militarily, it will have to concede local political autonomy in exchange for an energy wealth-sharing scheme (it will be necessary to export hydrocarbons toward the west) and formal recognition of the sovereignty of Damascus in the region. There are compelling historical precedents. In 1945, before retreating from Southeast Asia, Japan gave independence to the French, English, and Dutch colonies. The return of the colonial powers to these countries was difficult, especially in Vietnam. Because of Viet Minh resistance to the Japanese occupation, Ho Chi Minh demanded quasi-independence from France in 1946. After eight years of war, France was forced to recognize the independence of the Indo-Chinese states. That historical context is not the same as Syria's, but the strategy could be replicated in northeastern Syria if the United States is willing to be more involved with the Sunni Arab populations in the long term. This would mean maintaining a permanent military base in Rmeila (close to Qamishli), for instance. The Syrian Arab tribes want to avoid the same fate as the Iraqi tribes that trusted General Petraeus in their fight against al-Qaeda, only to be abandoned in 2011 to Nour al-Maliki, who reneged on promises made.



Iraq: A very uncomfortable situation for the United States

In Iraq, the situation is markedly distinct from Syria because pro-Iranian forces, mostly Shiite, are attacking the Sunni Arab bastions. Contrary to popular perception, the Kurdish Peshmerga have only a secondary role in anti-IS operations. On the one hand, only the conquest of territories disputed with Baghdad (Sinjar and Kirkuk) really interests the Kurdish Peshmerga; on the other, Baghdad has fixed red lines to avoid their territorial expansion.

Pro-Iranian politicians dominate the Iraqi government. Washington's hesitation to help Baghdad in June 2014 following the Islamic State's rapid expansion has provided Iran with a great opportunity to strengthen its influence, as Tehran did not hesitate to send aid to Iraq.²⁴ The relationship between Iran and Iraq is based on decades of relations with Iraqi politicians, many of whom sought refuge in Iran during the Saddam Hussein era. Iran is looking for a long-term strategic alliance with Iraq without neglecting short-term objectives. Iraq could become an economic competitor to Iran because Iraqi oil exports are growing rapidly and taking Iranian market shares in Asia. But Tehran prefers cooperation rather than confrontation. Iraq is helping Iran bypass international sanctions, and it is Iran's second non-oil economic partner. Iran does not treat Iraq as a satellite but as a partner, knowing the alliance of the two countries could be the backbone of a new regional order. The relationship with Saudi Arabia and Turkey does not leave the Iraqi government much choice. If the United States wants to avoid reinforcing the Iran-Iraq axis, it can be done in part by putting pressure on these Arab and Turkish allies so that they establish better relations with Iraq.

Today the only reliable ally of the United States in Iraq remains the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Massoud Barzani. The problem is that he has a very bad relationship with PYD. It would be suitable for the United States to promote a rapprochement between the two Kurdish political parties. In 2011, the PYD was not the leader of the Syrian Kurdish community. Other Kurdish political parties had emerged, and in the province of Hassakeh, the KDP was very influential. The Syrian opposition's rejection of the Kurds and jihadist attacks demonstrated the value of the PYD as it was the only one with military infrastructure.²⁵ The conflict allows the hard line of the PYD to assert itself, but once the Islamic State threat is neutralized, it may evolve on political and economic levels. Turkey could reconsider its position with regard to the Syrian Kurds if they abandon the creation of a Kurdish autonomous region and if they move away from the PKK. Turkey has previously accommodated

the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) led by the Barzani family in Iraq, on the condition that it does not declare its independence.

It will be difficult for the United States to prevent Iran from taking advantage of the elimination of the Islamic State in Iraq, especially since the post-IS situation that seems to be emerging is not likely to favor the integration of Sunni Arabs in the Iraqi government. Mosul may become a city in decline under military control and a hotbed for Sunni Islamic radicalism. The former economic metropolis of northern Iraq has lost its hinterland and its entrepreneurs. The creation and extension of the KRG deprives Mosul of its Kurdish customers, who are now spending their money in Erbil, Kirkuk, or Dohuk. The Islamic State has caused entrepreneurs to flee to the Gulf states, Europe, and the United States. They will not return to Mosul if the economic climate is not healthy. Now, it seems that Baghdad wants to punish Mosul rather than rehabilitate it. This city of 1.5 million inhabitants is in a process of structural decline that can only inflame radical Islam as a reaction to unemployment and economic crisis. Even though Mosul was becoming the capital of an autonomous Sunni Arab area in northern Iraq, the future of the city now looks bleak, highlighted by the territory's lack of hydrocarbon resources. However, is it not in Tehran's interest to make Mosul a bastion for Sunni fundamentalism? This will unite the Shiites around an Iraqi government subservient to Tehran. At the international level, if the image of the Sunni community deteriorates, it will only improve that of Shiism and, by extension, of Iran.

Conclusion: Return to realpolitik

Eliminating the Islamic State while avoiding strengthening Iran's influence in the region will be a very difficult undertaking for the United States. Iran continues to grow stronger in Iraq and in Syria, where Bashar al-Assad survives only thanks to Iran's economic and military aid. The Russian intervention was decisive in turning around the regime's military situation, but the base of the Syrian power is Iranian. If the Russians left Syria, Bashar al-Assad's regime would not collapse; it simply would not have the means to recover lost territories. Russia can limit Tehran's influence in Syria, but not replace it. The Syrian regime skillfully plays off both competitors in order to maintain a margin for maneuver.

In Iraq, the reconquest of the Sunni territories by the Iraqi army and the Shiite militias, both subject to Tehran, leaves America little space for maneuvering. In Syria, the Syrian army will have difficulty retaking control of the East. Pro-Kurdish forces are liberating Raqqa and a large part of the Euphrates valley. This may leave an



opportunity for the United States to give local power to Sunni Arab allies. But a Turkish intervention against the SDF would rule out this scenario. Whatever he said, Turkish president Tayep Recep Erdogan didn't want to embark on the adventure of capturing Raqqa.²⁶ This would leave the floor strategically open to Damascus and its allies, in eastern Syria. However, he refuses to see the PYD building a continuous Kurdish statelet from Afrin to Tigris River.

The United States should consider itself obliged to pick either the Turks or the Kurds. This issue exists because American hard power is no longer credible. Although a member of NATO, Turkey can collaborate with Moscow without fear of sanctions. America's precipitous withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 and its hesitations on Syria over the last five years have undermined regional allies' confidence in American power. If the United States has a true desire to block Iran in the Middle East, it must first restore that confidence. This involves the use of hard power against the Islamic State, just as Putin did against the Syrian rebels in east Aleppo. This requires abandoning "regime change" and a human rights-oriented policy in favor of realpolitik. Indeed, it is necessary to play on the same terms as the other competitors in the Middle East. This means recognizing that sectarianism is paramount in the region's social and political organization, that society is not ready for the implementation of democracy, and that authoritarianism is today, unfortunately, the only form of governance possible.

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The Working Group on Islamism and the International Order

The Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on Islamism and the International Order seeks to engage in the task of reversing Islamic radicalism through reforming and strengthening the legitimate role of the state across the entire Muslim world. Efforts draw on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners from within the United States and abroad, to foster the pursuit of modernity, human flourishing, and the rule of law and reason in Islamic lands—developments that are critical to the very order of the international system. The working group is chaired by Hoover fellows Russell Berman and Charles Hill.

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