

## II. Special Correspondence

### What Comes After ISIS? A Peace Proposal

by Clark McCauley

#### **Abstract**

*This proposal develops the following points: (i) Emotions are an important part of mobilizing for violent conflict, especially ethnic conflict. (ii) Sunni versus Shi'a in Iraq and Syria is more an ethnic than a religious conflict. (iii) Sunni in Syria and Iraq join ISIS for a job and for defense against humiliation and domination by Shi'a; religious ideology has little to do with recruitment. (iv) Sykes-Picot is dead; peace in the Middle East depends on development of some degree of self-determination and security, not only for Sunni and Shi'a but for Kurds, Alawites, Christians, and Druze. (v) There is a pressing need for a vision of the Middle East after ISIS; I briefly describe one possibility that Western countries might wish to support.*

**Keywords:** *ISIS; Syria; Iraq; Sykes-Picot; peace; ethnic conflict*

#### **Introduction**

ISIS is more than violence, it is a brand name. We need to fight the brand in a war of ideas that is just as important as the war on the ground in Syria and Iraq. In this text, I suggest a diplomatic initiative to describe the world we want to emerge in Syria and Iraq. I begin with a brief review of emotions in intergroup conflict, then assess the current situation, then describe a view of the future that the U.S. could offer for discussion, and end with some estimates of likely reactions to the initiative.

#### **Emotions in Intergroup Conflict**

Rational choice is not absent in intergroup conflict, especially in tactical choices, but emotions are important, especially for taking risks for a group or cause. Ethnic conflicts are fraught with emotions.

The idea of nationalism is that an ethnic group, a perceived descent group and its culture, should have a state. Nationalism was the most powerful source of political mobilization in the 20th century, despite punditry predicting that economic interest would supplant ethnicity. The weakness of economic interest and the power of ethnic nationalism was already apparent at the beginning of WWII, when the members of 'international' labour unions rallied vociferously for what union leaders denounced as a 'capitalist' war.

For ethnic majorities, domination by a minority is associated with the experience of humiliation. Here I understand humiliation to be a corrosive combination of anger in response to injustice and shame for not fighting injustice. Anger calls for revenge, not taking revenge because of fear is cause for shame, shame leads to additional anger at those who have shamed us—and the cycle continues. Shi'a in Iraq and Sunni in Syria experienced years of humiliation as majorities repressed by minorities.

Particularly humiliating is sudden reversal of status. In Iraq, the U.S. intervention against Saddam Hussein turned Sunni minority dominance into Sunni minority subjugation by Shi'a. In Syria, civil war turned large parts of the country from the original Alawite-Christian-Druze minority dominance of a Sunni majority to Alawite-Christian-Druze subjugation and ethnic cleansing by Sunni Muslims. In the incipient state of Kurdistan, made possible by U.S. support, Sunni minority dominance has turned to Sunni subjugation by a Kurdish majority. Roger Petersen's book, *Western Intervention in the Balkans: The Strategic Use of Emotion*

*in Conflict*, which traces the emotional consequences of status reversals in the Balkans [1] is a guide to the power of emotions that are also at play in the Middle East.

### ***Viewing the Sunni - Shi'a Divide as Ethnic Conflict***

Although often referred to as sectarian conflict, the conflict between Shi'a and Sunni in Iraq and Syria is not about religion. ISIS wraps itself in a particular fundamentalist form of Islam, but it is not the interpretation of the Koran that is at issue. ISIS wants political power, land, oil, money—wants to be the new Sunni caliphate, wants to be a state.

Sunni versus Shi'a in Iraq and Syria is no more a sectarian conflict than Loyalist vs. Republican in Northern Ireland was a sectarian conflict. The issue in Northern Ireland was not Catholic versus Protestant religious practice or doctrine, but two groups defined by perceived descent at war over land and political power.

Similarly the conflict between Jews and Palestinians is not a sectarian conflict, is not about Muslim versus Hebrew religious practice but about two perceived descent groups at war over land and political power.

Are Shi'a and Sunni ethnic groups? Are they defined by descent? Under Saddam Hussein's repression of Shi'a in Iraq, from 1979 to 2003, intermarriage between Shi'a and Sunni was not uncommon. Intermarriage as we know, means the dissolution of groups defined by descent. But after the U.S. deposed Saddam Hussein, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi began a campaign of attacking Shi'a in order to incite Shi'a revenge on Sunni, which would turn complacent Sunni into warriors bent on revenge against Shi'a. This campaign succeeded in its aims after Zarqawi blew up the Shi'a mosque in Samarra: Shi's and Sunni began a cycle of violence and counter-violence in which no one was safe. Militias arose on both sides to offer protection, and violence escalated. [2]

It is fair to say that Shi'a and Sunni were declining as ethnic groups in Iraq as perceived descent distinctions were blurred by intermarriage in the last decades of the 20th century. But violence and ethnic cleansing have strengthened group boundaries so that today intermarriage is rare and existing Shi'a-Sunni marriages are strained and breaking. [3] This is not a case of ethnicity causing war, this is a case of war building ethnicity.

### ***The Roots of Violence in Syria and Iraq***

ISIS is successful to the extent that the Sunni of Iraq and Syria see ISIS as their only effective defense against domination and humiliation by Shi'a. [4]. As Charlie Winter pointed out at a conference, ISIS communications in the territory they control emphasize the horrors of Shi'a retribution against Sunni if ISIS loses. For many in Iraq and Syria, ISIS is also the only source of jobs. [5].

But ISIS protection and ISIS jobs are currently welded together with an extremist form of Islam that many Sunni would rather do without. [6] To undermine Sunni support for ISIS, the U.S. must show Sunni in Syria and Iraq a path to security from Shi'a humiliation that does not depend on ISIS. Thus John Bolton, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, has argued that the creation of a Sunni state is required to defeat ISIS. [7]

Similar issues of security and status exist for other ethnic groups in Iraq and Syria. Kurds are seeking security from subjugation and humiliation by both Arabs and Turks. Alawites and Christians seek security from revenge and humiliation by the Sunni majority they previously dominated. Russians seek to continue Mediterranean port and airbase facilities and the survival of their ally Bashar al-Assad. Turks want good relations with the Sunni majority in Syria and no Kurdish state on their border. Iran wants to extend its influence and protect Shi'a Arabs. Sunni tribes in both Syria and Iraq have been both perpetrators and victims of violence; tribal sheiks have both welcomed and fought ISIS.

Denise Natali (National Defense University), who has been studying ISIS and related security issues in Syria and Iraq, recognizes the complexities of local actors in her February 2016 report, *Countering ISIS: One Year Later*. The last section of her report, titled Post-Da'ish stabilization, is worth quoting here.

Even if the U.S. defeats Da'ish tomorrow, there will be a day-after problem in much of Iraq and Syria. U.S. aims to stabilize Iraq and Syria should address the larger problem of weakened states and the emergence of strong, violent non-state and sub-state actors. This effort will demand a stable set of political security arrangements that can avoid the emergence of another Da'ish in the future. It should also assure that liberated areas are successful and stable so that people can return. This effort should include providing massive refugee assistance, immediate resources and humanitarian aid, developing local power sharing and security agreements, building local institutions, and mitigating regional spillover. [8]

What comes after ISIS? What would it mean to develop "local power sharing and security agreements, building local institutions"? The U.S. needs a diplomatic initiative that can promise at least a degree of security and status to all the major actors. This initiative would describe a world the U.S. would like to see emerge from the current violence in Iraq and Syria, and include a statement of willingness to talk with anyone and everyone about how to reach this world or something like it.

### ***A Future for Syria and Iraq***

The U.S. goal should be recognition of political units providing security and status for the groups identified below. Security and status would be assured to the extent that each unit has its own police and court system and controls a population-proportionate share of oil revenues in Iraq and Syria. The units may initially be thought of as states in a federal government responsible for allocating water and oil resources, but other descriptions of the units are possible: provinces, departments, or cantons. The U.S. would talk with any group or power about how to get to these or similar units. The U.S. should try to enlist EU/NATO allies to support the initiative. There should be no pre-conditions for the discussion, all borders and conditions being up for negotiation.

In particular, the lines drawn by the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 are on the table for reconsideration. Giving up the Sykes-Picot division of Syria from Iraq will be necessary because Sunni fears will not countenance a continuing division of Sunni into a Syrian majority and an Iraqi minority.

The initiative would raise for discussion the following as possible federal states with local institutions of governance and security:

- IS territory becomes a state of Sunni who want ISIS governance. U.S. will cease attacks on ISIS and cease opposing foreign volunteers for ISIS, including volunteers from the U.S.
- Tribal state for Sunni who do not want ISIS governance.
- Alawite state on the Mediterranean north of Lebanon (~Latakia, French Mandate 1920-1936).
- Turkman areas near the Turkish border annexed to Turkey.
- Kurdish state around Erbil.
- Shi'a state around Baghdad and south of it.
- Druze state next to Jordan (~French Mandate 1920-1936).
- Damascus Federal District with police but no military.

- Christians who wish to emigrate will be accepted as refugees in Europe and the U.S.

### ***Likely Reactions to such a Peace Initiative***

- ISIS will oppose the initiative because it threatens ISIS's claims to represent an international caliphate. But if ISIS loses more territory it may become ready to negotiate to save the remaining caliphate. At a minimum such an initiative would generate conflict inside ISIS between power pragmatists (localists) and international Islamist radicals (globalists). [9] Such a conflict would weaken ISIS from the inside.
- Sunni who do and do not want ISIS will be in conflict. The Awakening of 2007 showed the potential power of this conflict; in 2016 it would weaken ISIS from the outside.
- Tehran would likely oppose the initiative because any movement toward a peaceful solution in the area would reduce Iran's influence in Iraq and Syria.
- Hizballah would likely oppose the initiative and follow Iran, its supporter.
- Some Baghdad Shi'a may welcome the initiative as a way to reduce threat from ISIS, even at the cost of more self-determination for Sunni areas of the old Iraq. Others in Baghdad would be against any initiative that does not continue their revenge posture against the Sunni who dominated Iraqi Shi'a for so long. This is a split already evident in reactions to Prime Minister al-Alabadi's efforts to represent Sunni more in Iraqi politics.
- Moscow should welcome saving Bashar and de facto Western recognition for its Mediterranean air and sea bases in the Alawite state. Russia might welcome a division of territorial influence that can limit potential conflict between Russian and NATO armed forces.
- Israel would be satisfied with a devolution movement of Syria and Iraq from strong centralized states into militarily weaker federal states.
- Kurds would welcome recognition of their statelet.
- Turkey would strongly oppose recognition of the present de facto autonomous Kurdish territory but would see some sweetener in transfer of Turkman areas along the Syria/Turkey border to Turkey.
- Druze would be pleased at the prospect of recognition and a degree of self-governance.
- Christians, who are by now too few for effective self-defense, would be glad for an escape hatch to immigrate to Christian-majority countries.
- The United States would get credit in the Muslim world for seeking peace without Western domination and for putting an end to the Sykes-Picot colonial boundaries.
- France and U.K. should not oppose the initiative; these countries lost the benefits of Sykes-Picot decades ago.
- Arab oil countries will likely oppose the initiative because it does not promise to crush ISIS; however, they might be glad to see limiting Iran's power in Syria.
- U.S. sympathizers with ISIS would more likely go to join ISIS than perform attacks on U.S. soil.
- Refugees from Syria are likely to welcome an initiative that might permit some of them to return.

## Conclusion

The proposed initiative should, in public relation terms, be positive for the United States and help to reduce Sunni support for ISIS. It should shake up all sides by shifting the narrative from who is winning at the moment to a realistic vision of a future worth working for. Even opposition from Turkey, Iran, and the oil states might be tempered by a desire to avoid being seen putting self-interest above the welfare of millions who prefer peace. With such an initiative the U.S. government could seize the moral high ground that brings new friends and new opportunities.

What comes after ISIS? The old states of Syria and Iraq have dissolved in violence. The U.S. needs, and the people suffering civil war in these areas need even more, a vision of how peace can emerge from violence. Unfortunately there is currently no appetite in the U.S. for thinking beyond defeating ISIS. Similarly there was little thought for what would come after defeating Saddam Hussein. I have described one possible future in an effort to get the future in our sights. If this or a similar initiative were announced, and diplomatic efforts and material resources were committed to it, there is a chance of failure. However, if we do not think about what comes after ISIS, failure will be certain and new rounds of fighting will be all but certain—with no peace in sight.

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## Notes

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