Understanding ISIS is fairly simply, resolving it as a matter of National interest is a lot harder. At present, an effective US policy for the elimination of ISIS and retention of a reasonably democratic Iraq is a riddle with the combined complexity of the Gordian Knot and an eight-sided Rubik’s Cube. For those of you who are on long subway, bus or train commutes-Here is an ISIS Issues for Dummies.

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

This is a religious issue between the Sunni’s and the Sh’ias on a large scale. On a smaller one, ISIS is a Sunni based organization that has occupied significant parts of Iraq and Syria and is viewed as a terrorist organization by the West. They would say they were religious purists acting in the name of their God as they interpret the Koran. Others say they are just simple terrorists in a religious disguise who kill anyone who disagrees with their position.

WHAT IS ISIS?

ISIS is a Sunni outgrowth of the “Sunni Triangle” in Iraq-the home area for the late less than great Saddam Hussein. It grew out of the disaffection the local Sunni population had with how the central Iraq Sh’ia-dominated government was denying them their rights and ruling with a very hard hand.

When the US and Allied forces left Iraq due to, inter alia, the lack of interest by then Prime Minister Maliki-a Sh’ia-in signing a Status of Forces Agreement-our absence allowed Maliki to restructure his emerging democratic government into a traditional Sh’ia based one man band. He purged all the competent Sunni military leadership and replaced them with mostly proven incompetent Sh’ia thereby significantly weakening the new army we had struggled so hard to build. He trumped up charges against his Vice Premier, a Sunni, and chased him into the desert. He created a local monolithic Sh’iadom with the tacit and sometimes overt support of Iran-the Sh’ia heartland as Saudi Arabia is the heartland for the Sunni. The Sunni population of Iraq was disenfranchised and pretty much left to their own devices but at a distinct disadvantage compared to their Sh’ia bretheren. From this condition, ISIS arose.

HOW DID THIS ALL GET STARTED?

Using the Wayback Machine, return to the end of WW I and the Treaty of Versailles. One of the outgrowths was something called the Sykes-Picot Agreement. This was a treaty between France and England that divided up the newly available Middle East in order to resolve mutual interests-primarily oil access. The present day political boundaries of much of the Middle East were drawn by the treaty committees without regard to existing cultural and religious lines and we have been suffering the internal
frictions ever since.

The schism between Sunni and Sh’ia was ignored as was the Balfour Declaration granting the Jews a Home state and the inferred agreement between Britain and Faisal brokered by Lawrence where Faisal would rule most of the Moslem populations of the old Ottoman Empire less Turkey and Egypt. In sum, Sykes-Picot has resulted in a very bad land deal.

Over time, the various brokered rulers managed their internal frictions with a somewhat iron hand. Note that Saddam, a Sunni, controlled his majority Sh’ia population and gave everyone a bit of something in return for loyalty. Maliki rejected that approach by essentially declaring the Sunni’s societal outcasts. ISIS is a direct outgrowth of the disaffection.

HOW DOES ISIS MANIFEST ITSELF?

The heart of ISIS-land is the Iraqi Sunni population in the Tikrit Triangle-Saddam’s family base. It spreads into portions of Syria and roughly resembles the 1848 Caliphate which encompassed those areas prior to Western political cartography. ISIS governance is extremely well-organized with the infrastructure of a relatively mature nation. It manages social services, revenue collection, security, military operations, religious management/interpretation and suicide elements. It is a real government albeit religious-based-at least from the public view.

Its occupation is marked by strict Sharia law, taxation, impressment and expulsion of non-believers. People viewed as unwilling to provide 100% loyalty are either beheaded, otherwise executed or forced out. Compromise and assimilation are not ISIS words. Extreme purity of cause is stated as the basis for the style of occupation.

It has considerable wealth from a combination of Iraqi and Syrian oil, local taxation and revenues received from other Sunni elements—primarily Saudi Arabian. It has a very sophisticated global social network engagement program which demonstrates considerable psychological and cultural awareness to attract foreign fighters and support from disaffected members of Western nations. So far, they are credited with attracting more than 20,000 foreign personnel to the cause. These newly available ISIS assets range from sex slaves to frontline fighters to suicide bombers—no one is more enthused about a cause than a recent convert.

HOW DOES THIS GET RESOLVED?

The best solution, from our Western perspective, is that the Government of Iraq, retake ISIS-Land and reconstitute a government that includes Sunni assimilation into the mainstream of life. Presently, this is not possible due to a combination of military ineptitude and lack of interest in Sunni assimilation. The present PM of Iraq has pledged to resolve both issues but it will take time. Meantime, how do we contain ISIS and prevent its/their leakage to other parts of the world? At present, in this regard, we have failed utterly, as shown in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt.

WHO ARE OUR FRIENDS AND OUR ENEMIES REGARDING RESOLUTION?

The countries that our logical friends, may not be for a variety of reasons. The countries that we may consider enemies could be our friends but won’t be for a variety of reasons. We would like to ally with both enemies and friends to focus on ISIS but can’t get there from here. It’s a mess. Reviewing our regional friends and enemies list we find…………..

IRAN

Because Iran is strongly supporting the Baghdad government against ISIS, one would assume Iran is an
ally in being in our efforts to control/eliminate ISIS. Not so. Iran is the central religious focus of the Sh’ia branch, has strongly supported the Sh’ia majority within Iraq and was the mainstay of the Sadr Militia with which we had major combat issues in our tenure. The Sh’ia’s are naturally aligned against the Sunni ISIS and have made the point whenever they re-occupy previous ISIS controlled Sunni populations to the detriment of long term assimilation.

Recall that Iran fought a major war with Saddam’s Iraq but that all was forgiven with Saddam’s demise and worked very hard to insure a Sh’ia-centric Iraq emerged regardless of US desires for a more mixed democracy. Iran is also a strong supporter of the Assad regime in Syria-another Sh’ia based government the US desires to go away.

Iran is strongly supporting the Iraqi efforts against ISIS to include provision of its quality Qud Brigade and primary military commander, Gen Sulemani. Sulemani has been officially declared a terrorist by the US. Visualizing him working in close association with our in country Lt General is a stretch.

Concurrently, the US is mano a mano with Iran over nuclear proliferation. It is going to be extremely hard for the US to develop any support associated with Iran regarding Iraq with these issues extant. Within Washington, Iran is viewed as perhaps our most significant problem in the region with its nuclear development program and potential to create a major confrontation with Israel. Getting help or helping here is pretty doubtful.

KURDISTAN

Probably our strongest ally in the area and the one most engaged and successful against ISIS. On the surface, we should be supporting them all the way as we did when Saddam was in power. They know how to fight well and hate ISIS even though they are essentially Sunni-centric.

Problems……..because they are good and essentially independent from Baghdad, Baghdad does not want us to help them in any meaningful way that will assist their independence. Ditto Turkey.

TURKEY

Turkey-ostensibly our strongest NATO ally in the conflicted zones, has officially requested we not provide any support to the Kurds-specifically arms, uniformed trainers or US military units in any form. Turkey has been battling Kurdish factions for years and is adamant they not establish an independent nation.

Turkey also benefits financially from the now-ISIS exported oil from a portion of the petroleum crescent via the petroleum pipeline going from Iraq to the Mediterranean. The present government’s desire to weaken the Kurds as a priority issue severely limits any steps the US may wish in the northern region against ISIS.

SAUDI ARABIA

The Kingdom is the religious center of the Sunni religion. It is also, ostensibly, our strongest and most consistent ally in the region. Internally, this is a highly conflictive situation. To overtly counter ISIS, is to potentially destabilize the present royal line which is the greatest concern of both the Royals and ourselves.

Much of ISIS’ funds are derived from private Saudi sources and the largest single citizenry exporting itself to ISIS is Saudi. In sum, like it or not, Saudi Arabia is ISIS strongest albeit private supporter of ISIS.

SYRIA

The Assad regime is a Sh’ia based government. One third of the country has been occupied by ISIS and
the inflicted government would seem a natural ally in the war against ISIS. BUT……..we are on record to overthrown the Assad regime and have been supporting the rebel movement with varied assets ranging from intelligence to air strikes to covert operations.

Our rebel allies are predominately Sunni-based and include a healthy dose of Al Quaida-our sworn enemy in Iran and Afghanistan has somehow managed to be on our side in Syria. Complicated world out there.

JORDAN

The least wealthy and most vulnerable of our allies, is at present, our strongest ally in the anti-ISIS effort-in no small measure due to the public torching of its F16 pilot by ISIS. In return for Jordanian support, the US has provided more than 1.2B$ in aid this year to the King. They need it.

In return, the King has significantly engaged his air and ground forces on the Syrian border and within Syria. He also houses and supports the largest group of Syrian refugees even though it could be potentially destabilizing. His voice and presence is the bridge between the Western and Middle Eastern culture clashes.

There is only so much the King can do before running out of reserves. Supporting the refugees-both Palestinian and Syrian is a major effort. Assisting US interests with close integration of military assets consumes most internal resources and capabilities. Going after ISIS within Iraq, is presently a bridge too far.

IRAQ

The elephant that owns the phone booth. It was PM Maliki´s actions that created ISIS and its now PM al-Abadi´s task to fix what´s broken. His problem is that to be truly effective in ISIS-Land, he needs to place a number of competent Sunni´s within the re-occupation government elements, the Iraqi military and the Iraqi governing bodies. Further, he has to seriously build credibility with inclusion of Sunni interests within the fabric of the entire nation and society. Presently, this is a slow process.

Whatever elements of the government manage to re-occupy ISIS-Land, they must engage the locals with a helping and supportive hand. This has not yet been the case. On the contrary, when Sh´ia-dominate government forces have secured ISIS areas, they have spent most of their time extracting their version of religious justice by killing Sunni´s and keeping them isolated from any benefits. Until this changes, ISIS will continue to prosper and any efforts to support the Greater Iraq and our interests will be for naught.

OK-WHAT CAN WE DO?

Not a whole lot in a meaningful way without some help. At present, we are conducting highly selective and possibly effective but not decisive air strikes from aircraft and drones. To be really effective with air, we need people on the ground with intimate knowledge of immediate local targets. That means either local Iraqi´s we have trained or our own people.

Placing US forces on the ground requires both an invitation from the Iraqi government as well as a signed Status of Forces of Agreement (SOFA)-neither of which have been received yet. To place actual combat units requires all of the above and a lot more.

10,000 troops requires in excess of 50,000 support personnel to keep them fed and oiled with the machinery of war. The US public as well as the White House has not indicated this is an acceptable option.

To imbed US advisors within the Iraqi structure requires the same invitation and SOFA plus rules that
allow them to accompany their Iraqi counterparts and share the same risks-advisers that cannot accompany can observe and report but not be a credible improvement.

Presently, we have a US Lieutenant General and around a thousand personnel in a Baghdad compound training newer elements-including Sunni soldiers. That may be as good as it gets.

We can hope/train/encourage non-US military to support the Iraqi government. So far that means the Iranian military which we do not view favorably.

Ultimately, the best answer is a credible Iraqi military with Sunni and Sh’ia and an inclusive government that provides for Sunni interests. Some assembly and a lot of time required.

IN SUM

In the region, our enemies ought to be our friends. Our friends are often our enemies due to local circumstances and very little is simple. To engage is one thing. To effectively engage is quite another.

You may now work the Sudoku puzzle. It will be more rewarding.

About the Author

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