Iraq: The Strange Partners of Foreign Affairs

Judging by any host of news organizations and commentary shows on television you would think Iraq has already fallen completely into the hands of a radical Islamist terrorist group called ISIS. While it is true the military and strategic gains achieved by the group so far this year have been impressive and unexpected by leaders in the West, this lack of expectation may be accounted for more by the absence of diligence on the part of Western analysts covering the Middle East than by any miraculous strength of force on the part of ISIS. The ISIS movement in Iraq has been bolstered by the hardened fighters located largely in eastern Syria, where there has always been a heavy population of Sunni Muslims. The reality of life in Iraq, however, is that Sunnis do not dominate throughout the entire country and they are in fact a miniscule percentage in the capital city of Baghdad. Indeed, some astute analysts point to this very desperate demographic situation as being one of the root causes in generating the upsurge in ISIS popularity: the inability to develop any stable, effective, grassroots democratic institutions in Iraq that could powerfully represent Sunni interests led to the swelling of the ranks in ISIS and the de facto acquiescence and simple support by non-participatory Sunni civilians. In some ways this can indeed be considered another mark against the record of American engagement in Iraq: while many have documented the problems in emerging from post-conflict Iraq over the last decade, most of us that deal in academia with international relations have long known that it is a tricky and messy path to move from post-conflict to true nation-building. The lack of a true civil society, the absence of grassroots organizations that listen to and serve the greater popular needs of the country, and the near vacuum in which there isn’t any effective homegrown native governance at all has not only left a giant hole to be filled but also set the stage for severe poverty, corruption, and despair. It is these ghosts innate to post-conflict society-building that last long after battles and wars have ended and leave indelible wounds that are easily poked and prodded by radicalist groups.

This is what brings me to the most fascinating and perhaps bitterly ironic aspect of the ISIS ascendance. It is clear that the country just to the east of Iraq would be most displeased at a radical Sunni terrorist group running rampant throughout the country. Iran of course has a long and violent history with its neighbor and has been steadily and stealthily increasing its Shia influence in and around Baghdad and other major Iraqi cities for the last decade. There can be no doubt that Iran will see ISIS as a risk to its foreign-policy strategy in the region but also perhaps as a direct threat to its own national security goals, given the open declarations from ISIS that it wants to create something akin to a de facto Sunni caliphate. It is doubtful there is a place of partnership in such an entity for Iranian Shiites. This is clearly why news reports in the United States have talked about the astounding potential turnaround in which America and Iran are at least contemplating sitting down at the negotiating table to consider joint initiatives and potential partnerships that could offset or deter any more ISIS advancement in Iraq. Geopolitics makes for strange bedfellows indeed. What is even more fascinating is to consider the fact that a partnership between the United States and Iran is not the most ironic potential outcome to emerge from the potential fight against ISIS. For that irony we must look to none other than President Assad of Syria.

The casual observer could assume that there would be no discord or disconnect between ISIS and Syria, given their shared religious connectivity. This assumption exaggerates the place of primacy of religion in the decision-making of a dictator. While it is true the Sunni population is large in Syria, Assad himself is an Alawite. More importantly, he is still the reigning leader of his country who just miraculously fended off what seemed to be a global desire to have him removed by local rebellion. My guess is that President Assad, having defeated (in his own mind at least) the
foreign-policy interests of the United States and astoundingly maintaining his presidency, will not be very interested in any of the policy goals or regime objectives of ISIS. And therein lay the great irony: it seems entirely plausible to me that the United States will end up utilizing Assad as an asset in the fight against the group. Even more ironic: given the chaos, ruin, and destruction all over Syria from the past several years of fighting, Assad and the military might be the only legitimate players in Syria capable of truly challenging and taking on the radical Sunni fighter.

So welcome one and all to the wonderful craziness of foreign affairs in the modern multipolar world. Where dire enemies can quickly become roommates and sworn adversaries suddenly find themselves cuddling sweethearts. Principles apparently do not matter. International law does not seem to matter much more than principles. And the definition of terms, especially when it comes to defining the heroes and villains of the world, is an incredibly flexible and ambiguous endeavor. I do not state this as a criticism or complaint. Quite frankly, the world of international affairs has always been this way and will likely always be this way. What is more amusing is how so many countries that pride themselves on their principles and on their adherence to international law seem to first conveniently forget that commitment when they need to and then they have the audacity to act surprised when events force them to jump into bed with the very people they had just spent several years trying to kill. The Middle East is not unique in this contradiction. It is simply the region where it is taking place today. Wait a while. With enough patience you will likely find it sometime soon in North Africa, Southeast Asia, or Central America. The bedroom games of geopolitics are not unique to any region, religion, creed, or people. Strange and ironic they may be. But rare they are not.

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