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Is strategic cooperation between the United States and Iran possible?

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Ephraim Kam details the conflicting regional interests that make strategic cooperation between Iran and the U.S. unlikely. Iran, he argues, simply does not see any help the U.S. could provide in Iraq as being worth the political cost of asking for that help.

By Ephraim Kam

The impressive successes of jihadist organizations in Syria and particularly in Iraq have aroused a great deal of anxiety in many nations across the political spectrum – the moderate Arab states, Iran, the United States, European countries, and Israel – as well as non-state factions within Iraq and Syria. The major worry is that the seizure of territorial strongholds by these radical organizations will result in shockwaves affecting the entire Middle East, encourage extremist trends in the region, generate a wave of regional terrorism, and destabilize additional regimes. The threat is perceived as particularly dangerous because most of the states at risk are incapable of coping with the threat on their own.

Two countries that in practice have the ability to tackle the jihadist threat are the United States and Iran, and both view this threat with grave concern. The United States is worried about the possibility that stronger jihadist organizations, primarily the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria and on the fringes of Lebanon, will undermine the stability

enjoyed by Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the smaller Gulf states and perhaps also Egypt, and damage destabilize the Iraqi regime. At the same time, the U.S. administration is afraid that IS will export terrorism against U.S. and allied targets, and will ultimately harm Israel as well. For the Iranian regime, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon are the most important countries in the region. Iran is afraid that IS successes will undermine the Shiites' status as the leading force in Iraq, harm Shiite militias that are the vehicle for Iranian influence in Iraq, establish a strong Sunni counterforce, and threaten Baghdad and Shi'a holy cities, as well as Iran's economic interests in Iraq. Moreover, IS successes in Iraq also strengthen jihadist organizations in Syria and Lebanon and further threaten Assad's regime. The Iranians fear that if the deteriorating situation in Iraq leads to the division of the country into two or three entities, the shockwave will spread to Iran, a country also made up of minorities with a significant Kurdish population.

Thus, the United States and Iran now share a strategic interest: to reverse the successes of jihadist organizations, especially IS, in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. This interest recently resulted in the claim, made mostly in the United States, that the severity of the jihadist threat has created the foundation for strategic cooperation between the U.S. administration and the Iranian regime with regard to Iraq. This possibility is linked to developments that have occurred in U.S.-Iran relations over the past year: the election of Hassan Rouhani as president of Iran, connoting affirmation of the moderate line he represents in Iran's foreign relations; the development of the dialogue between the two nations, even if it is currently limited to the Iranian nuclear issue; and especially the negotiations on Iran's nuclear program, leading so far to the signing of the interim agreement. This would seem to suggest that the signing of a final agreement on the nuclear issue could promote strategic cooperation against IS.

In June 2014, both countries made general reference to the possibility of cooperating in Iraq against the IS threat. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said that the administration is open to discussing such cooperation and doesn't rule anything out a priori, as long as the topic is a constructive move that will help stabilize Iraq and respect the Iraqis' right for a unified government. President Obama added that Iran could choose to be a constructive or destructive force in the fight against IS. Secretary of Defense Hagel defended the idea of U.S.-Iranian cooperation by mentioning that also before the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan there was coordination with Iran. Administration spokesmen stressed that in any case there would be no military cooperation or military action with Iran.

On the Iranian side there may be disagreements within the ranks of the highest echelon. President Rouhani stated that Iran is willing to consider cooperation with the U.S. if the latter would take steps against terrorist organizations in Iraq, but the Iranian deputy foreign minister claimed that there is no need for direct talks between the U.S. and Iran on the issue because Iraq is capable of looking after itself. More importantly, Ayatollah Khamenei stated that there are no benefits in having relations or negotiations with the US except in certain specific cases.

Seemingly, then, there is a basis for some cooperation. From the U.S. and Iranian perspectives, it is critical to stop the IS threat because of its severity. However, the ways to do so are problematic and their success not guaranteed. The United States – and perhaps also Iran – prefers not to operate alone in Iraq, and is looking for a partner to help it confront IS. Cooperation in Iraq could expand the dialogue between the two to other issues as well, and especially help achieve a final agreement on the nuclear issue. From the Iranian perspective, cooperation in Iraq could help achieve substantial U.S. concessions in the nuclear negotiations and lead to significant easing of the currently imposed sanctions. It could also help the United States come to terms with the Assad regime as the lesser of the evils. Even more importantly, if cooperation helps stop IS, it will enhance Iran's influence over Iraq and improve the situation of the Assad regime and Hizbollah.

However, a more painstaking examination of the considerations and interests of the U.S. and Iranian governments does not leave much room for serious strategic cooperation between them on Iraq. First of all, despite the dialogue between them about the nuclear program in Iran, a heavy residue of suspicion muddies their relations. In the eyes of the Iranian regime, especially its radical wing, hostility towards the United States and the suspicion that the U.S. is constantly working to topple the Islamic regime are fundamental components of its basic worldview and not merely a foreign policy tactic. In the view of the Iranian regime, retaining its current nature and survivability is inextricably linked to its antagonistic attitude to the Great Satan. Therefore, the Iranian regime will be in no rush to veil its hostility towards the United States in order to fight a common enemy. On the U.S. side, too, there are important factions harboring deep-seated suspicion and anger at the Iranian regime, which began with seizing the U.S. embassy in Tehran in 1979 and holding dozens of U.S. nationals hostage for 444 days. This was followed by mass demonstrations in Iran calling for "death to America," leading to Iran being seen as the central threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East.

Second, an important question is: how, precisely, can the United States and Iran help one another in their shared struggle against IS? Both have ruled out any military cooperation in Iraq. The United States is already carrying out limited airstrikes in Iraq, and Iran is already extending military aid to the Iraqi government and Shiite militias in Iraq, in the form of arms deliveries and IRGC advisors. This is all happening without the two countries doing anything jointly. Indeed, there may have been some tacit collaboration between Washington and Tehran to force former Prime Minister Maliki to step down in favor of Haider al-Abadi - possibly because Iran also understood that Maliki had brought much more damage than benefits. However, the main contribution the U.S. administration could expect from Iran would be help in persuading the new Iraqi government to grant Sunnis real power in the government in order to drive a wedge between the moderate Sunni leadership and the Sunni jihadist organizations. But it is doubtful that Iran, looking to ensure the continuity of the Shiites' supremacy in Iraq, will risk a disagreement with Shiite leaders over this, especially if this entails cooperation with the United States.

Third, the United States and Iran have different interests in Iraq. The U.S. administration is trying to retain the last drops of its influence and connections in Iraq, establish a broad-based moderate government founded on an inter-ethnic alliance that would include Sunnis as full partners, and reduce Iran's influence there. Iran, on the other hand, has the opposite goals: it is seeking to reduce U.S. influence in Iraq and sever the links between the United States and Iraq, strengthen its own influence, and make sure that any Iraqi government perpetuates the Shiites' power there. The United States wants to strengthen the Iraqi security forces, but it would have to demand the weakening of the Shiite militias – the foundation for Iran's influence – to achieve that goal.

Attaining an agreement on the Iranian nuclear program will not change these considerations. The agreement, should it be signed, will lead to the lifting of the sanctions against Iran, and this will strengthen Iran and reduce its need for U.S. assistance in Iraq, if such assistance is, in fact, even needed. To tackle the jihadist threat, the United States needs the backing of the moderate Sunni camp, but both the nuclear agreement and U.S.-Iranian cooperation in Iraq will alienate the Sunni camp in the Middle East as it fears these factors would strengthen Iran. This concern might drive moderate Sunnis to cooperate with radical organizations, splintering the Sunni camp even more.

At the bottom line, Iran has several important advantages over the United States in entrenching its influence in Iraq. Iran shares a border with Iraq and has relationships going back many years with leaders, organizations, political parties, and armed militias of great importance in the Iraqi Shiite camp and, to a lesser degree, also with elements in the Kurdish enclaves. These connections are not free of problems or constraints, but they clearly overshadow any connections and influence the United States may have with or in Iraq, especially after the late 2011 withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq. In other words, a continued dialogue between the United States and Iran, and especially the achievement of an agreement on the nuclear issue, might lead to some sort of cooperation, limited perhaps to the exchange of information and some coordination. But even if that does happen, and even if it helps to stop IS, such a development would first and foremost help Iran rather than the United States because of the former's advantages in Iraq. For all these reasons, an effort on the administration's part to promote strategic cooperation with Iran in Iraq is liable to prove a mistake.

And, finally, the Israeli perspective. The threat posed by IS has not yet harmed Israel because the jihadist organizations are, for now, focused on seizing control of strongholds in Iraq and Syria. But at a later stage they are liable to threaten Israel too by trying to destabilize the Jordanian regime, using Jordan as a launching pad for terrorist attacks against Israel, trying to penetrate the Palestinian arena and perhaps also the Sinai Peninsula, and posing a threat from Syria. In this sense, a closer relationship between the United States and Iran is, in practice, positive for Israel: if some sort of cooperation between the United States and Iran emerges that will stop IS, Israel will also reap the benefits in the short term, while in the long term, it could have a positive effect on Iran's attitude to Israel.

However, those are long-term advantages and their probability is, at this point, low. In the short term, such cooperation is risky for Israel: for one, the United States might be willing to make real concessions to Iran on the nuclear issue in exchange for help in Iraq, and for another, such cooperation would further strengthen Iran's influence in Iraq and thereby promote Iran's desire for regional hegemony.

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