

This same norm is followed across the border in the Iranian Khuzestan province where there are Arab tribes applying the same tribal rules, even in cities with millions of inhabitants. This may be why some killings in Iraq seem to defy all rationale by Western standards. The act of killing the individual appears to be the purpose; the targets are of no importance as long as they belong to the right tribe.

What is new and alarming is that sectarian and religious violence are now adhering to the same tribal pattern, as if following the only system with which the Iraqis are familiar. This creates a wider scope of targets on all sides of the conflict for any would-be attackers. All they have to do is target areas with a predominance of one sect or another, and the objective of killing the enemy in retaliation is easily accomplished. Unlike tribal violence, there is no mechanism to end the cycle through settlements, as the battle field is wider, the killers are many—and so are the victims. There is no one to negotiate with or settle with, so these so-called “random killings” continue.

Appreciating this dynamic is of paramount importance for the US planners. One can look at the sectarian violence in Iraq purely from this tribal angle and try to devise solutions on that basis. This might actually work provided that the other factors, including the US military presence, are eliminated. One possible scenario is to let the tribal leaders and elders from all sects meet to negotiate an overall settlement. If opting for this process, it may be necessary to create a government fund to pay families for their loss. Compared to the billions spent on the war, the many millions needed for this process is a bargain considering all that’s at stake. This process would also provide a way for the families of those killed to start over, especially since, in most cases, the victims were the bread winners of their families. Many of the names of the victims can be obtained from the hospitals and morgues or from the families themselves. This approach represents a local solution for an out-of-control problem by providing justice the Iraqi way. The long-term solution is to revamp the civil modern justice system based on a rule of law. Meanwhile, as long as that system is not yet applicable, we might as well use what worked for the Iraqis for decades even hundreds of years.

24. The Syrian factor

It is clear to all that the Syrian government is sitting on shaky ground, mostly due to destabilizing efforts by the US aimed at regime change in Damascus. Unfortunately, this has led the Syrian ruling elites to circle the wagons and act in ways that have contributed to the instability in Iraq. Most Syrians are Sunni. On other side of the Syrian border lie the most violent Sunni provinces of Iraq. Syrian ruling elite are the Alawite Shiite (a minor sub-sect of Shiite) minority, though they deliberately and forcefully keep this little fact out of any public debate. The Alawite are said to constitute only 10–15% of the Syrian population, which would explain their desire to view any discussions about religious sects as taboo. The

support this Shiite Syrian government is providing to Iraqi Sunnis across the border is their way of negating any arguments made at home that they are anti-Sunni. They want the Syrian public to believe that, despite being Shiite and keeping an alliance with Shiite Iran, they are supporting the Iraqi Sunnis that most Syrians consider their brethren. They hope this will win them Syrian public support and help them hang on to power, despite religious differences and in the face of many regional and world powers advocating for regime change in Syria.

The US can not totally remove Lebanon from the Syrian sphere of influence without a regime change in Syria, a fact that seems to be driving current US policy.

The government in Syria will always have a dual interest in Iraq. They support the Sunnis on one side because the Syrian population demands it. On the other hand, they are sensitive to the interest of their Iranian allies who favor strengthening the Shiite government. In essence, this Syrian government, due to its relationship with Iran, is more likely to have a balanced approach towards Iraq out of sheer necessity and would never put all its weight behind the Sunni insurgency.

If the US is interested in not increasing Syrian support to the Sunni insurgence, it should rethink the goal of regime change in Syria. Israel should reconsider its goals as well, as the devil you know is better than the devil you don't. It is well known that the only real opposition movement in Syria to have a chance of taking over if the regime topples is the Syrian Islamic brotherhood. A government led by the Orthodox Muslim brotherhood is not likely to be friendlier to the US or Israel. Considering this important fact, it is mind-boggling that both Americans and Israelis consider toppling the Syrian regime to be a major goal, and damn the consequences.

The current government of Syria is secular. It holds some common goals with the US in terms of promoting political stability in Iraq. Another eye-opening fact is that an unstable Syria would become another battlefield in the global anti-terror war, as elements of Al-Qaeda currently in Iraq would find safe haven in any new Syrian chaos. They would then move their bases from Iraq to Syria once their situation in Iraq became untenable. A conflict in Syria is guaranteed to eventually spill over to Israel and Palestine. The US is already dealing with a similar situation in northern Pakistan. When Afghanistan ceased to be safe for the Taliban, they moved to northern Pakistan.

The US foreign policy towards Syria is probably the least justifiable, given the stated goals of promoting stability in Iraq and security for Israel. The only winner with such a policy is Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia has always played an open role in supporting the Sunni sect in Lebanon, which holds the mantle of power at present in its Sunni prime minister and his allies in parliament. The (Wahabi Sunni) Saudis want to be a counterweight for the (Shiite) Iranians and the Syrians in Lebanon. The Saudis pursue their interests in Lebanon through economic means and via their political influence over their Western allies, the USA and France. The US foreign policy towards Syria is being used as a negotiating card by the Saudis to further their own goals at the expense of US long-term national interests in the region.