



While The Jihadists Make Headlines, Fundamentalist Iran is Making Major Gains

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The United States' policy in response to both Iran and the Islamic state is confusing and contradictory. While the US appeases Iran, it is driving other states in the region to ally with the same jihadists the US is attacking. Washington must reexamine the Iranian threat by confronting it, rather than appeasing its leaders.

The Islamic State's beheadings not only make for gruesome headlines, they also influence emotionally the leaders of important states where reason rather than emotion should prevail. To counter the jihadists for their beheadings, the United States and its allies, as they wage an aerial bombing campaign against the Islamic State (formerly ISIS), are equally busy appeasing Iran, which they believe erroneously is on their side against the Sunni Jihadist movements.

This is unfortunate for while the jihadists have effectively been contained, as the IS withdrawal from Kobani, the Syrian Kurdish town on the Turkish-Syrian border demonstrates after nearly five months of trying to overrun the town, Iran has been scoring major regional gains. It does so through its proxies, the Shi'ite Ansar al-Islam, better known as the Huthis, in Yemen and through Hizballah in Lebanon. Both these movements are no less fanatical and brutal than their jihadist rivals. The Huthis' official slogan is "Death to America, Death to the Jews."

In Yemen, the Huthis after taking over San'a, the capital and most of the country, imposed a three week siege on the presidential palace which forced the elected President's abdication. They have now given political parties a three day moratorium to meet their demands without making any concessions of their own. A blood bath is in the offing after which Iran's reach will include not only the Hormuz straits but Bal al-Mandab, the narrow straits

between Yemen and east Africa through which 14 per cent of the world's energy flows and a major international artery of trade to the Suez canal.

In Lebanon, Hizballah is extending its reach deep into the Lebanese army as the latter becomes increasingly embroiled in the fight against the Jihadist groups, mainly Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qa'ida affiliate. The growing alliance between the militia and the army under the Iranian mantle, which has included high-ranking and high profile visits of leading Iranian politicians, diplomats and military advisors to Lebanon and its army over the past several months, has emboldened Hizballah to explore the possibilities of opening a second Shiite front against Israel from Syrian controlled Golan Heights. Its leader Nasrallah threatens to strike against Israel that would include an attempt to wrest territory in the Galilee in the north of Israel.

Nasrallah has hardly contained his threats to the Israeli front. In another speech, he threatened the small Gulf Kingdom of Bahrain that lethal squads could infiltrate the country and create extensive havoc if its suppression of the Shiite majority and arrest of Shiite political leaders continue. Bahrain's Sunni Kingdom has faced a strong, often violent Shiite opposition since the outbreak of the Arab Spring four years ago, which it has suppressed with the help of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, all of which are Sunni. Nasrallah, following in the footsteps of several Iranian leaders, has also accused the beleaguered Kingdom of naturalizing Sunni Pakistanis and Afghanis, many of whom are members of its security forces, in a bid to transform the Sunni minority that rules the country into a majority.

These gains, the takeover of Yemen, which from the vantage point of Saudi Arabia and most of the Gulf States, is the second Arab state after Iraq to fall under Iran's control, and its increasing hold on Lebanon, would not have been possible had Iran not been emboldened itself by the feeling that its expansion on both the military nuclear program as well as its increasing regional reach is being met by a West which appeases Iran rather than confronts it.

Instead of pressuring Iran, President Obama has vociferously objected to attempts in the Congress to increase sanctions in anticipation of the June deadline in coming to an agreement over the nuclear issue and Department of State Secretary Cary has had several high-profile meetings with Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Zarif characterized as fruitful and cordial.

What else then could Iranian leaders think after endless negotiations with Iran during which Iran develops its military nuclear capabilities? How could

it think otherwise as the United States continues its drone attacks against al-Qa'ida and allying Sunni tribes in Yemen?

US policy of appeasing Iran and its allies makes no sense. In Iraq and Syria it may be attacking the Islamic State, but in appeasing Iran, it is driving moderate Sunni states and tribes in Iraq and Yemen to ally with same Jihadists they are attacking.

This policy of appeasement towards Iran is seemingly justified by a wider doctrine that the US has to retrench from overextending military engagements that characterized the previous decade by balancing "offshore" between Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel, the major regional players in the area, irrespective of the degree of friendship these actors display towards the US. The promoters of this doctrine argue that these actors will constrain each other to produce a modicum of stability at little to no expense to US blood or treasure.

The doctrine might have theoretical appeal, but it is hardly realistic, principally because two of the actors, Iran and Turkey have imperial ambitions based on imperial pasts and a radical theocratic outlook. This is especially true of Iran.

Iran's eventual nuclear breakout and its growing regional reach through vicious proxies can only destabilize the region through nuclear proliferation. The propensity for existing oil states to bandwagon with Iran, may enable Iran to control most of the world's oil resources – to the detriment of vital United States and European interests. Moreover, there is a danger that a state like Saudi Arabia going nuclear could fall under the Jihadists.

United States policy should change course in two significant ways. First, give primacy to meeting the Iranian threat by confronting it rather than appeasing its leaders. Second, let Iran confront the Jihadist problem rather than free-ride at the United States' expense. Despite the beheadings, Western interests would be better served if the Jihadists in Iraq and Syria turned into Iran's Vietnam, the costs of which would force the Iranians to abandon its nuclear military program and bring an end to its bid for regional hegemony that would only spread mayhem in the region.

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