



SYRAQ: WHAT IS IT?

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In the summer of 2013, most commentaries on the Syrian civil war's effect on Iraq's Sunni population argued that the rise of Syria's Sunnis against the government in Damascus had emboldened their co-religionists across the border, providing a morale boost to the Iraqi community that feels marginalized by a Shia-dominated Iraqi state, closely allied to Shia Iran. However, what was neglected in these assessments was the "cause and effect" relationship between the Syrian civil war and the deteriorating security situation in Iraq. An independent variable was being ignored, namely the role of geography in explaining how the Syrian civil war had a bearing on the deteriorating security situation in Iraq.

Between April and mid-June 2013, approximately 2,000 people had died in Iraq, the worse level of violence since the sectarian civil war from 2006 to 2008, yet Iraq's spiral of violence had gone relatively unnoticed in media and policy-making circles, primarily focused on the conflict in Syria. What was needed at that time was the ability to reimagine the geography between Syria and Iraq, which I argued for in a paper ^{Iraq's Security Outlook for 2013} for the Italian Institute for International Political Studies in the summer of 2013, exactly a year before the ISIS invasion of Mosul and close to a third of central Iraq.

I described this area as "Syraq", a zone of tensions that straddles both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border. Syraq essentially corresponds to a landmass historically referred to as the al-Jazirah, a quasi-island surrounded by two rivers, the upper Euphrates and Tigris, which fan out in separate directions north of Baghdad. This geographic area in both Iraq and Syria had been home to a predominantly Arab Sunni population, albeit shared with other communities, such as Christians of various denominations, Yezidis, and



Kurds. Conflicts on both sides of the border as of 2013 created a security situation analogous to what Washington insiders refer to as “Afpak,” a neologism that acknowledges how instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan are intricately linked, and which was created by DC insiders to link Afghani and Pakistani affairs in a joint American foreign policy. A similar approach was needed back in 2013 when dealing with the Syrian and Iraq crises.

The Afpak problem is a legacy of Anglo-Russian colonial policy during the “Great Game,” dividing the ethnic Pashtun tribes along the Durand line, a border that reflected imperial compromise without taking into account how it divided tribal communities. More than a century later, these various tribes began joining the ranks of the Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Taliban, with both factions benefitting from cross-border relations.

The Iraqi-Syrian border was formed in the same manner, out of British-French collusion after World War One, dividing Sunni Arab tribes as well as the historic trading links between the cities of Mosul (in today’s Iraq) and Aleppo (in today’s Syria). In the thirties clandestine cells began to form of young Iraqi officers who came from modest, Sunni Arab middle-income families from the northern Arab provinces in the vicinity of Mosul, a region that suffered economically after the creation of Syria. With the imposition of customs barriers and changes in currencies, the new border between Iraq and Syria curtailed the historic trade between cities such as Mosul and Aleppo. The primarily Sunni Arab officers would begin to advocate pan-Arabism, a movement that would rectify the arbitrary boundaries dividing the Arab nation and unite the Fertile Crescent from Iraq to Palestine. It was these officers who led Iraq on the road to numerous military coups, creating the opportunity for Saddam Hussein to rise to Iraq’s presidency in 1979.

The al-Jazirah side in Iraq includes the restive Iraqi province of al-Anbar, the site of Falluja, which witnessed pitched battles between Iraqi insurgents and US forces in 2004. In the same

province, Sunni Arab Iraqis began protesting in December 2012 after the arrest of several bodyguards of a prominent Sunni Arab politician, igniting long repressed discontent over what they perceive as systematic discrimination by Baghdad. On April 23, 2013, 44 people were killed in clashes between security forces and Sunni Arab protestors in the town of Hawija, creating greater indignation among the Sunni Arabs of Iraq, swelling the ranks of the disaffected, and raising a call for a return to arms similar to the days of the Iraqi insurgency.

The unrest in the Anbar province, as well as in the Ninawa province where Mosul is located, had made it difficult for Iraqi forces to police these areas, and thus had created a space that permitted the resurgence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), as well as a support area for Syrian rebels. The tribal links straddling the Iraq-Syria border were just as significant as the tribal links straddling the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. As in any uprising, insurgents required the support of the local populace to operation from within their areas. ISIS needed the Iraqi tribes’ consent to operate from their areas, and would not have been able to reignite the violence in 2013 without local Iraqi support. A network of ISIS cells or their sympathizers were most likely in Mosul prior to its fall. Beforehand, the citizens of Mosul, disaffected with the sweeping arrests and intimidation of Iraq’s security forces, either supported or acquiesced to the presence of ISIS cells. Those in Mosul who stayed either actively gave support to ISIS’s entry, passively resigned themselves to its presence, or fled to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) or other parts of Iraq.

What later became the Islamic State basically corresponded to the geography of al-Jazirah. Its capital, Raqqa, was located in the Syrian part of the Euphrates, and their first major foothold in an Iraqi urban center was Fallujah,



another Euphrates town, which had capitulated to ISIS control in January 2014. The offensive into Mosul on 9 June 2014 was followed by a rapid series of attacks into Iraq, as ISIS – since this moment onwards the Islamic State (IS) – seized several towns and cities, including Tikrit, securing two major urban centers on the Tigris flank of the al-Jazirah region. The Islamic State's borders had been essentially determined first by the location of the two rivers north of Baghdad, and second, by its ability to rule predominantly Sunni co-religionists within al-Jazirah. Any groups deemed heterodox by IS within its borders, such as Yezidis, Christians, and the Shi'a in this area, would eventually be forcibly expelled or eliminated to create a religiously homogeneous populace. The Kurds on the Syrian side of this territory in al-Jazirah, even though primarily Sunnis themselves, were loyal to their secular ethno-nationalist organizations, and would represent a tenacious challenge to IS' control over this region.

At its peak, IS controlled al-Jazirah, but today it operates in rural hideouts in the same area, like it did during its low point

in 2010. IS has contracted and reverted back to terrorist attacks and guerrilla-style hit-and-run attacks, and ironically, in this weakened state today, it will be harder to defeat it. Defeating a terrorist group that is on the run and uses guerrilla tactics is more difficult than destroying IS when it fielded a standing army that tried to actually hold ground and cities in the al-Jazirah.

The Islamic State was able to resurrect itself in 2010, and the fear is that it could do it again. Although IS is still in existence and can regroup within Syraq, it does not necessarily mean that history will repeat itself. This overview of the relationship between geography and the rise of IS highlights how paramount it is to appreciate the connected threads, tribal, societal, and historical, between Syria and Iraq. In terms of future policy, the rise of IS should have underlined the importance of paying attention to this region and the reconstruction and development of Syraq to prevent IS' re-emergence.

I. AL-MARASHI, *Iraq's Security Outlook for 2013*, Analysis No. 197, September 2013, ISPI.