**The Greater of Two Evils**

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With troops stationed in all corners of the world, American military presence remains both a matter of great contention and of great importance on a global scale. Yet, recently, we have seen a trend away from direct, boots-on-the-ground intervention towards indirect action that includes merely training foreign troops and providing air support, and nowhere is this as apparent, or as dangerous, as in the Middle East. In fighting the Islamic State, we have encouraged other nations to take the lead, and one nation in particular has stepped up to the task: Iran. But as the Western nations find themselves in the position of allying themselves with Iran, they have ignored the nation’s dangerous role as a catalyst for sectarian violence throughout the Middle East, a role that is becoming critical. Can and should we choose between this “lesser” of two evils? When looking at the bigger picture, we can see that the answer must be a resounding no. Allowing Iran to gain a foothold in the volatile region would only bring further instability and sectarian violence, perpetuating the conflict for generations to come.

Recently, a revealing and disturbing New York Times headline read “U.S. Strategy in Iraq Increasingly Relies on Iran.” The quickest and easiest way to defeat ISIL means allowing Iran to do our dirty work for us, falling back on their support from the ground, even without official collaboration, so that we ourselves do not have to provide the necessary troops.⁠1 Using the logic of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” we are, in effect, allies with Iran, even though we officially ignore each other. Yet, in context, this indirect alliance is dangerous, for the issue of the Islamic State has broader implications for the stability and future of the region as a whole. It is part of a generational conflict, and thus, we must consider not just the immediate outcomes, but also how our strategies today will affect the forces of extremism for decades to come.

Much of the turmoil in the Middle East is shaped by the Shia-Sunni conflict, a cycle that is perpetuated and pushed forward by the government of Iran. By sponsoring Shiite extremists in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq, Iran effectively spreads fear and tension throughout the Middle East, and this quest for power is perhaps the most dangerous aspect of the Ayatollah’s regime. Nowhere is this trend as apparent as it is in Iraq and Syria, where the Shia-Sunni conflict has become a deep cycle. In a way, the current crisis is the direct result of the sectarian conflict left in the wake of the 2003 invasion and the Syrian Civil War. Under Saddam Hussein, Iraqi Sunnis had oppressed and persecuted Shias, creating anger and fear that allowed the rise of Shiite extremists in the power vacuum that was left after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. After nearly a decade of conflict, many Iraqi Sunnis responded by joining the Islamic State. In Syria, too, Sunnis have feared not just Bashar Al-Assad, but also Lebanon’s Hezbollah, Iraq’s Shiite militias, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guard.⁠2 As the Syrian Civil War destabilized the region, each of these groups sought to take advantage of the situation, seizing power and influence, and fear of these extremists pushed more Sunnis towards the Islamic State. Thus, the Islamic State is a product of a cycle decades in the making, one that may not end after its defeat.

This history perfectly illustrates why involving and validating Iran in the fight against the Islamic State would only invite further conflict. If we allow Iran to take charge in the fight against ISIL, we will be allowing them to gain unchecked influence in Iraq – influence that will only spread. The Iraqi conflict is not solely about ISIL, and it will not end when ISIL is defeated. If we do not ensure that Iraq becomes a stable, pluralistic democracy after the defeat of ISIL, the power vacuum that will be left will undoubtedly lead to yet another sectarian conflict. With Iran in a position of influence and power, its connections to Hezbollah, Assad, and other Shiite extremists will leave these groups with an opportunity to seize control, leading to a Shia monopoly on the region.⁠3 Without a stable, pluralistic government to counter it, Iran will only gain more power, both in Iraq and in the region as a whole. Inevitably, this influence will create more frustration among Sunnis, leading to another group of extremists, and the cycle will continue, leaving us with a situation that could be even worse than the one we have now.

Even now, as Iranian militias have helped to liberate and guard parts of Iraq, security checkpoints have become home to Shia flags and posters of the Iranian supreme leader, symbolizing the power Iran has already begun to seize.⁠4 Yet, these very flags can have a detrimental effect on the fight against the Islamic State itself, for they are hated and feared by Iraqi Sunnis and will essentially push them closer into ISIL’s arms. Many Iraqis actually fear Iran more than they fear the Islamic State, for its militias have frequently victimized Iraqi Sunnis and are seen as a threat to everything they hold dear.⁠5 Faced with Iranian Shia forces, countless Sunnis may, in fact, turn to the only protector they have left – ISIL. In order to avoid this, it is essential that the coalition to fight the Islamic State is professional and nonsectarian – a coalition that, by definition, cannot include Iran.

Letting Iran take the lead in fighting ISIL will have disastrous effects both on the current fight and the regional balance of power in years to come. Therefore, we must rely on other regional powers, such as Turkey, Israel, and the Gulf-Arab states, to support our strategy. Iran will continue to fight ISIL unilaterally, but we must no longer rely on their support, whether directly or indirectly. Instead, we must alter our strategy to exclude Iran entirely, so that it will gradually be shut out of decision making and bear little to no effect on the ultimate effort to defeat the Islamic State.⁠6 That way, we can determine the future of Iraq, ensuring that it finally becomes a stable, pluralistic democracy, freed from warfare and extremism.

When fighting the Islamic State, we must look at the bigger picture, and victory while collaborating with Iran would come at too high of a price. ISIL, while it is perhaps the greatest threat we face today, is the result of forces far deeper than one organization and one movement. By validating Iran, we will only be strengthening these forces for future generations of conflict. Thus, Iran is, in fact, the greater of the two evils we face. ISIL may be the fight of the moment, but Iran is the catalyst of instability generations in the making. It is the spark that can ignite the region, both now and in the future. We must leave Iran out of the coalition and out of the fight.

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