

MULLAH DREAMS: NOT COUNTING SHEEP

By Adam Garfinkle



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A July 3 *Daily Beast* column by Josh Rogin has been getting a lot of play over the past few days. Even my friend Michael Doran mentioned it—in order to get at a particularly egregious Tony Blinken remark—in his Brookings piece on Wednesday. Rogin's main burden is to describe an argument allegedly going on inside the Obama Administration over the most useful attitude to take toward the Assad regime in Damascus in light of the

ISIS breakout in Iraq.

The basic difference is simple, as these things go, and as Rogin apparently accurately sketches it out. One side reasons that if ISIS is the more urgent and bigger potential danger right now, whether because it is destroying the Iraqi state or poses a terrorist threat to the United States and its allies, then, according to the standard wisdom that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, the Assad regime becomes our objective ally. This is despite the fact that this would put us on the same side as Iran, Russia and, just by the way, Hizballah. But that's fine because, as some believe, we need to bring Iran "in from the cold" and, with its current crop of leaders, we have the best chance to do so since the Iranian Revolution. In this view, the Iranian Revolution is ready now for its Thermidor phase, to invoke Crane Brinton's classic language from 1938, and we have every interest in speeding that nebulous social impulse to political fruition.

The other side reasons that ISIS exists in whatever strength it now musters because of the Assad regime, which has behaved in such a way as to greatly exacerbate sectarian toxins in the region. As long as Assad and his Alawi thugs are there ruling in Damascus, Sunni jihadism will thrive; so he is not an objective ally, but rather he and his allies are the source of the problem in the first place. The solution, however hard to achieve, is to build up the Free Syrian Army and other non-jihadi Sunni opposition forces in Syria to change the battlefield situation so that some kind of political settlement can be arranged providing for Assad's departure.

According to Rogin, Blinken, the Deputy National Security Advisor, epitomizes and leads the way for the pro-Assad side, which would accord with views Blinken has taken going back at least to 1999, when he served on the NSC staff and tried to persuade Bill Clinton that the Syria Option was the way to crack the nut of Arab-Israeli peace. (Then Senator John Kerry, it may be recalled, nursed a similar view at the time.) Here is what he said—the selfsame remark Doran quoted yesterday: "Anyone calling for regime change in Syria is frankly blind to the past decade; and the collapse of eastern Syria, and growth of Jihadistan, leading to 30 to 50 suicide attacks a month in Iraq."

It's not obvious who rallies the second point of view within the Administration, but Rogin quotes Robert Ford, the recently departed U.S. Ambassador to Syria:

The people who think Bashar al Assad's regime is the answer to containing and eventually eliminating the Islamic-based threat do not understand the historic relationship between the regime and ISIS. [They] don't understand the current relationship between Assad and ISIS and how they are working on the ground together directly and indirectly inside Syria. . . . The people who think Assad's regime survival is essential have not explained how his survival would solve the problem of extremism in Syria.

Like Ambassador Ford, Ambassador Margaret Scobey before him and Ambassador Ted Kattouf before her, and really anyone who has paid day-job level attention to Syria in recent years, agree with this assessment. The Assad regime and its allies—especially Iran, if one is looking at the region in geopolitical terms—are the problem, not the solution. The fact that Rogin could not find anyone in a “higher” line position within the Administration to speak on behalf of this position for the record does suggest that the *de facto* pro-Assad point of view now rules the Administration roost. But since the policy is still that “he has to go”, it is sort of embarrassing to actually come right out and say this. And if that's so, then Doran's argument—that the Administration's recent announcement of \$500 million in aid to the FSA is a cynical “two-step”, now-you-see-it-now-you-don't form of bait-and-switch diplomacy designed just for show—is plausible.

Well, what to make of all this? I myself have mused in earlier days about bringing Iran in from the cold, too. That would be a huge game-changer, and for the better. When Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani says that the United States and Iran can cooperate over Iraq—as he said yesterday to *Asahi Shimbun*—it gets some people all fuzzy and dream-eyed. The Thermidor thesis might be right, too, and maybe Rafsanjani is its unlikely herald.

But it's nothing to bet the rent on. Certainly, whenever I hear arguments urging the United States to be delicate and generous in the nuclear negotiations for the far-reaching impact it may have politically in Tehran, I cringe up real tight. That's a sucker's argument if there ever was one, and one generally proffered by only slightly veiled propagandists for Iran. It certainly is no way to negotiate the sticky details of a life-and-death scale, tentative agreement over Iran's nuclear program.

Anyway, as we all know, hope is not a policy. Wanting Iran to be a normal, moderate, non-WMD-possessing actor that can deal pragmatically with the United States and others—maybe even Israel one day—is not the same as being able to have it. Ambassador Ford is right: Assad and his Iranian and Russian allies are the problem in Syria, and that is a problem which now looms over the entire region, radicalizing all politics, militarizing all tactics, poisoning hope for a normal future for the peoples of the Levant and beyond.

Clearly, however, while the Syria problem has bled into Iraq, Iraq's woes are not entirely or even mainly imported. Even if ISIS's origins are in the Syrian cauldron, aren't the real dangers manifest now in Iraq? Isn't ISIS truly the most dangerous challenge before us, and, if so, aren't Blinken and his likeminded Administration colleagues right? And shouldn't we also assume, forced to it by the plain logic of the situation, that Blinken privately agrees with John McCain and others who say we should be attacking ISIS by air in Iraq now, if not also attacking it in Syria?

No, he isn't right, and his *de facto* pro-Assad view is to serious *realpolitik* what “Risk” is to real strategic planning. He's rarely been right, and the fact that he worked for many years as Joe Biden's principal foreign policy adviser echoes the fact. When Bob Gates hauled out the commonly spoken Washington line in his recent memoir that Biden has been wrong about everything over the years, he tacitly implicated Blinken as well. (Actually, Biden hasn't been wrong about everything, only nearly everything...no one is perfect. And his “wrong rate” has dropped sharply in recent years, which is a good thing, seeing as how he is now but a heartbeat away from the Oval Office.)

He isn't right because, as I have been at pains before to note, ISIS is not a particularly dangerous force, at least not yet. It is barely institutionalized in any form, including its recently proclaimed Islamic State. Even with “acquired” U.S. military equipment and some money from Mosul banks, its order-of-battle is extremely modest. High-end estimates of its troop strength hover around 10,000, but most of those are probably loosely affiliated tribesmen on a romp or common criminals grasping an opportunity. It has shown no capability for governing anything, it cannot think except in a fevered ideological cant, and it is arrayed in tribal alliances that are more fragile than oasis spider

webs in a desert dust storm.

The best evidence, perhaps, for ISIS's weakness is the fact that the Assad regime has actually been cooperating with it against the FSA inside Syria for some time. It has avoided attacking ISIS, and it has even paid money for oil in ISIS-controlled territory. If ISIS is no serious threat to Damascus, the only reason it could be construed as a serious threat to Baghdad is if the chaos there masquerades as an open door. It is Iraqi government weakness, not ISIS strength, we have been witnessing this past month. If ISIS eventually becomes more institutionalized and dangerous, the U.S. military has plenty of time and plenty of ways to deal with it. If we ever see "the whites of their eyes", those guys will be in deep, deep trouble.

My view, also noted before, is that the United States cannot save Iraq as a unitary state. It is too late for that, and its dissolution was probably going to happen at some point anyway. True, at earlier decision points wiser choices might have made a difference, in a path-dependency sort of way. For example, I argued, in vain, that we should postpone what turned out to be the "purple finger" Iraqi election of January 2005 rather than hold it on the basis of a national-list, single-district electoral system, because that would embed from the start dangerous sectarian divisions in the society. Better to wait, do a census with the help of the UN and EU-guarding UN census takers, and hold an election based on a proportional representation system that would have diluted sectarian divisions by forcing local communities to come together. Others made a similar argument, but the White House wanted the photo-op extravaganza of a quick "democratic election" for its own political purposes. That's what it got, even as Iraq got an electoral system that could not have been more ill-suited to its circumstances.

Then, of course, had the Phase IV planning for the war been done properly, or been done at all, there would perhaps not have been a widespread and protracted insurgency that resulted, among other things, in the forced homogenization of ethnic neighborhoods and communities all over the country. That demographic fact has made the contemplation of *de facto* partition so much easier to swallow psychologically.

Yes, "mistakes were made" (note passive voice allowing no active noun to be named...), and then Nouri al-Maliki and Barack Obama made still more mistakes and it doesn't matter anymore, really, and here we are where we are and Iraq is what it is—or rather, what it isn't. And what it isn't is a unitary state in its ungainly 1920 incarnation, something that only endured through its post-Hashemite history thanks to iron-fisted military dictatorships, and that would not likely have long endured as a democracy no matter the chosen electoral system. (I should note in passing that the loose federal model for Iraq championed years ago by Les Gelb and yes, Joe Biden, and recently re-churned by Mr. Gelb in a *NYT* op-ed, never really had a chance either, since such a system ultimately would have had to rely on two communities trusting whomever among the third held the gun in the capital; either that or be fastidiously detailed into a confessional constitutional model along the lines of the Lebanese system, probably impossible in Iraq—not that that's worked so wonderfully in Lebanon either...)

So I repeat that the best longer-term U.S. option in the region is to support and speed, and try to guide and perhaps limit, the ambitions of Kurdish independence. And here the most important and actually quite remarkable development of recent weeks is the very frank Turkish comment that Kurdish independence is something now within the realm of contemplation. The Administration should have been on this portfolio already months ago and certainly, since this message has erupted from Ankara, should now be talking intensely if quietly about the forthcoming Kurdish referendum on independence. The purpose? How the two parties can cooperate to bring about this seismic shift in the region's geopolitical terrain with the least amount of risk and the maximum amount of mutual benefit. I am very skeptical that the Administration is capable of thinking even that far ahead—the referendum will probably be held in September—because this is a White House-driven and dominated operation and the White House is in total reactive mode.

Beyond the Kurdish aspect to U.S. policy, we must stop thinking about Iraq as some sort of end in itself, or as some sort of clinging moral obligation. There are many thousands of Americans in Iraq working as NGO "saints" and not-so-saintly private contractors; there are many personal American-Iraqi governmental relationships, military and civilian, built up over more than a dozen years in some cases, in pain right now, too. Tough; sorry. Iraq must be considered from a U.S. national security point of view right now primarily as a one huge potential counterterrorism theater—period and full stop. (Same as Afghanistan, tentatively. Again tough; sorry.) There is no room here for bitter-sweet nostalgia or weeping guilt to play any major role in policymaking. Whatever happens to Iraq *as such* is not an existential problem for the United States. As for reputation, well, so much crockery has already been broken

that it's hard to imagine much of an inventory left to break—besides which, the Obama Administration has pinned the crockery bill on its predecessor, and while that's only partly fair, it's nevertheless a useful optic.

We do have important secondary obligations flowing out of Iraq to local allies—Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and a few others—and making good on those obligations is very important for its own sake and for the future of the U.S. reputation in the region and beyond. And we have a tertiary interest in keeping Iraqi oil on the international market. But these are normal foreign policy dilemmas, not existential crises. We do not owe Nouri al-Maliki anything; his sins are his own to pay for. We certainly do not owe the Iranian regime any assistance is trying to prop up Maliki's Shi'a rump statelet. Rafsanjani's seemingly generous statement to *Asahi Shimbun* is, to my way of thinking, just short of risible. It's as if he's saying to some Western naïf in a souk, "Hey friend, want to buy a carpet, cheap?" If Iranians want to die for Nouri al-Maliki's political adventure, with which they have long been complicit anyway, let them do it without us. If the Balkans were not worth a single Pomeranian grenadier, according to Bismarck, Iraq is not worth a single American pilot, according to Garfinkle.

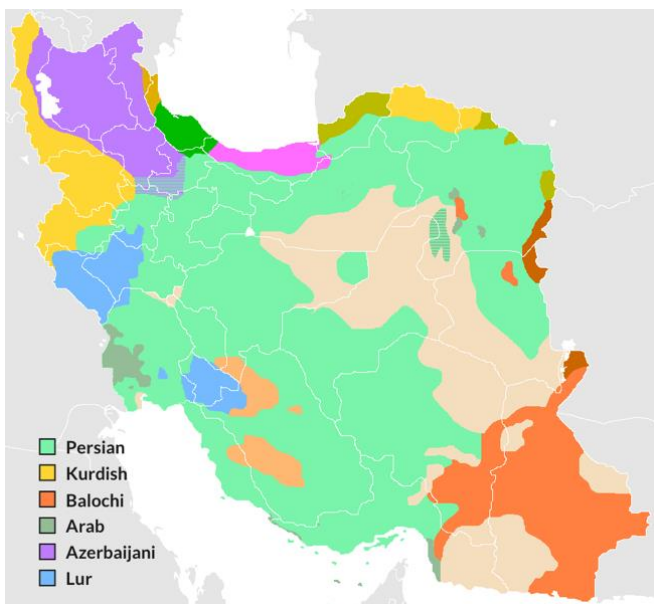
If we must stop thinking about Iraq with too much feeling that puts us way behind the curve on an onrushing reality, and if, as I argue, Iran with its Syrian ally is the source of recent Levantine misanthropies, then it behooves us to conclude on an analytical angle pointed toward Iran.

Now, I noted that if Iran's Thermidor is nigh, that would be worth encouraging for all sorts of reasons. The question is, however, how do we best encourage it—by propitiating the current Iranian political elite, or by busting their heads against the wall? Should we help Khamenei and his emissaries muddle through in hopes of a positive future political evolution, or should we force failure on them—Rouhani and Zarif, too, because they're not really so much our friends—the quicker that the bringers of Thermidor can find their way to power?

One can never know for sure when contemplating a less-than-transparent decision system—and the Iranian one certainly fits that description. But forcing failure seems to me the more promising approach.

How do we do that? Well, an easily developed list is at hand: Do not go soft in the P5+1 negotiations, do not erode the sanctions regime further, and be prepared to build it back up if Iranian behavior warrants; keep repeating the determination that Iran will not have nuclear weapons and that all options remain on the table to prevent it; prepare multi-level economic warfare plans short of kinetic strikes, not to exclude naval blockades; intercept Iranian arms shipments to insurgents in the region and, perhaps, once unloaded, sink the ships; reveal Assad's chemical weapons declaration to have been bogus; quickly and significantly aid the FSA to do real harm to Iran's Alawi allies in Damascus; and, above all, use the current ISIS crisis to harm Iran for the longer term.

What do I mean by that? The ISIS phenomenon has played to Iran's advantage in some short-term ways. It has rallied all non-Sunni constituencies to see Iran as an ally of one kind or another. After all, objectively speaking, even the Al-Saud has coincident interests in Iran's fighting and harming ISIS in Iraq. But in the longer run, what is happening is liable to turn into a strategic nightmare for Tehran. Let us count the ways.



First, conflict between the Shi'a and Sunni parts of what used to be Iraq could go on for a long time. In the near term, Iran could be forced to intervene on the ground to stop an ISIS surge toward Baghdad. It seems to be possessed by a local version of the Brezhnev Doctrine: once Shi'a, stays Shi'a. Even well short of that, if Iran gets enmeshed in defending a client Shi'a rump state over time, it will likely be pushed by Iraqis to regain the Sunni lands now under ISIS and tribal occupation. If it rises unwisely to that task, whatever the temptations of weakness espied to the north, Iranians will bleed for months and years and almost certainly will do so without success. Persian-Arab antipathy will wax the longer such an uncomfortable liaison lasts. The Sunnis cannot take and hold Baghdad, let alone Basra, but the Shi'a

cannot retake Falluja or Ramadi or certainly Mosul. We have then before us, on balance, a stalemated situation. If Iran gets sucked into it, it will suffer grievously, particularly as the Sunni world rallies to prick and pinch it at the margins from every front it can penetrate. Good.

Second, Kurdish independence will undermine Iranian security, potentially big time. Kurdish independence will irritate Baghdad, of course, but there is nothing practical Baghdad can do about it. Maliki's fulminations against the Kurds in recent days are just that—fulminations that foul the air but do little else. Same with Syria—Syria's Kurds are on their own now, in the midst of trying to sort out their loyalties and disloyalties to other Kurdish organizations and clans in Turkey and Iraq, but this will get sorted out in due course likely without much practical interference from Damascus. Turkey is on the verge of historical decisions regarding its own Kurdish community, and if the AK era provides no other lasting positive service to the country, its rapprochement with the Kurds will have made it all worth it, if that effort can be brought to a reasonably and relatively happy ending. Only Iran is put at real long-term risk by the rise of an independent Kurdistan.

Again, let us count the ways. There are about 7 million Kurds in Iran out of a population of around 76.5 million. Most live in the northwestern parts of the country between what used to be the Iraqi state and the Azeri-populated parts of Iran. In other words, the territory of the Kurdish Regional Government, soon to be an independent state, is directly adjacent to Iranian Kurdistan, and that border is for practical purposes impossible to seal. (The Special Forces guys reading this are licking their lips about now...)

Iranian security forces also have to go through Azeri-speaking territory to even get there, and while that is not problematic now, the example of rising and successful Kurdish nationalism could set off kindred feelings and movements in the other non-Persian parts of Iran—among Azeris, among Baluch, and among Arab-speakers in Khuzistan province. Iran is not and never has been a modern nation-state; it is a quasi-imperial multi-ethnic state run by Persians. (Why hasn't the MSM told you that, you wonder? Ask them.) The unsettling of Iranian Kurdistan could touch off very expensive and difficult state-maintenance problems for the mullahs, who are even less popular in most non-Persian communities than they are in Persian ones. Right now, Iran is one of the few states in the region that can boast effective control over its national territory. Change that and you change a lot.

In short, between the potential swamp-like entanglements awaiting in rump Shi'a Iraq to the west, and the rise of the Kurds to the northwest, the dissolution of the Iraqi state bodes far vaster and longer term problems for Iran than for the United States. So, as the Beatles once said, "Let it be."

Add to that the likely chaos awaiting to the east, as fanatical Sunni Taliban duke it out with Tajik, Uzbek, and Pashtun warlords in a post-U.S.-withdrawal Afghanistan, and things don't look so peachy for Iran. It's enough to make Baluchi restiveness along the border with Pakistan, and Iran's long borders with Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, look positively serene by comparison—and serene they ain't, just by the way.

Don't misunderstand me: The collapse of the Iraqi state is not something we should like or have longed for. A lot of innocent people are being harmed by it, as is of course also very true of the collapse of the Syrian state. But, as they say, if all you have is lemons, you make lemonade. If what we have is a real mess, it behooves us to tilt the table so as to sluice it on our adversaries. Some who are trained professionally in this sort of business could count the ways to do just that.

Just a parting PS, if I may. For all I know, Josh Rogin sketches the intra-Administration dispute referenced at the outset accurately enough, but beyond his role as a reporter he is not to be trusted as knowledgeable about Syria, Iraq or the region. Here is just one reason why: "Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and Assad are both Shi'ites; ISIS is Sunni", Rogin wrote.

Well, no. When you've seen one "Shiite" you have not seen them all—apologies to Spiro Agnew. Rogin apparently doesn't know the difference between a Ja'afari "Twelver", an Ismaili, an Alawi, a Druze and a Hello Kitty doll. Just because all of these are not Sunnis does not make them all the same. Good grief; will American journalists ever get a clue about this part of the world?