

## On Other Fronts: Syria and Iraq

Iran itself is not the only front in the Sunni-Shiite sectarian civil war. There is also a northern front called Iraq and a western front called Syria. While most eyes have been focused on the Straits of Hormuz, major events have been occurring in these other important places.

First in Syria, both the Russians and Iran have been busy.

*A recent visit of the heads of the Quds force to Syria is the "strongest indication yet" that Iran is supplying the Assad regime with weapons, AFP quoted a senior US official as saying Saturday.*

*Major-General Qasem Soleimani, head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds force, visited Syria this month, AFP reported. "We think this relates to Iranian support for the Syrian government's attempts to suppress its people," the senior US official said.*

*(<http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=253567>)*

*The head of the Arab League warned Friday that Syria may be sliding toward civil war, as security forces fired on thousands of people who poured into the streets in support of army defectors who switched sides to try to topple President Bashar Assad, as U.S. expressed concerns amid reports that a Russian-operated ship with a "dangerous cargo" has reached conflict-torn Syria.*

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*Russia has long been a major arms supplier to Syria, where President Assad is trying to crush a 10-month-old wave of unrest by military force, prompting Western and Arab sanctions against Damascus that Moscow has not joined.*

*"The ship was carrying a dangerous cargo," the source at St. Petersburg-based Westberg Ltd. said by telephone on condition of anonymity. "It reached Syria on Jan. 11th," he said.*

*Rosoboronexport spokesman Vyacheslav Davidenko said on Friday that the arms exporter would neither confirm nor deny the report. (<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/13/188117.html>)*

*At least five Syrians were reportedly killed in gunfire Saturday as the emir of Qatar suggested sending Arab troops to halt the bloodshed in Syria, the first Arab leader to propose such a move.*

*The Syrian government cut power and communications in restive areas of Damascus, and five were reported dead in protests around the country, Syrian opposition activists said according to Al Jazeera.*

*Speaking with CBS's "60 Minutes," Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani said that he was interested in Arab military intervention in Syria. Asked if he was in favor of Arab nations intervening in Syria, Thani responded: "For such a situation to stop the killing ... some troops should go to stop the killing."*

*(<http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=253586>)*

And in Iraq a standoff continues over the attempt to arrest the Sunni Vice President.

*In a telephone interview with Asharq Al-Awsat, Iraqiya bloc spokesman Haidar al-Mulla stressed that "no national reconciliation meeting can take place in Iraq whilst Nuri al-Maliki is prime minister." He added "such a meeting will not take place at the end of this month, or even the end of the year."*

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*Al-Mulla stressed “Iran is the one that has brought al-Maliki [to power], and is trying to forcibly keep him in power. If the Iranians felt that al-Maliki remaining in power was no longer in their interests, and not in line with the local and regional variables, then they would not be so devoted to him.”* (<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=28070>)

*ZUBAIR, Iraq — A bomb killed at least 53 Shiite pilgrims near the southern port city of Basra on Saturday, an Iraqi official said. It was the latest in a series of attacks during Shiite religious commemorations that have killed scores of people and threaten to further increase sectarian tensions just weeks after the U.S. withdrawal.*

*The attack happened on the last of the 40 days of Arbaeen (commemorating the death of Hussein or 40 days after Ashura), when hundreds of thousands of Shiite pilgrims from Iraq and abroad visit the Iraqi city of Karbala, as well as other holy sites.*

*Saturday's blast occurred near the town of Zubair as pilgrims marched toward the Shiite Imam Ali shrine on the outskirts of the town, said Ayad al-Emarah, a spokesman for the governor of Basra province. The shrine is an enclave within an enclave -- a Shiite site on the edge of a mostly Sunni town in an otherwise mostly Shiite province. (<http://www.newsmax.com/Newsfront/ML-Iraq/2012/01/14/id/424204>)*

Please read all the articles for more important information.

**Analysis.** It appears as though the Arab League wishes to minimize the extent of the conflict generated by GCC forces operating to dethrone Assad. They appear to want to portray this as a strictly secular revolution against a brutal dictator and not a religious civil war. While there is little doubt that Bashar Assad is not exactly benevolent to the general populace of Syria, he is perhaps over portrayed as the devil incarnate.

The Saudi plan to dethrone Assad is apparently running into some serious trouble. The Russians may be supplying the Syrians with munitions of some sort, perhaps riot control agents. Russian interference in the civil war takes it out of the realm of an internal dispute and internationalizes it primarily to keep the US from interfering. Russia does not want to see Syria go the way of Libya. Tartus is the last Russian naval station in the Mediterranean. They will fight to keep from losing it.

The last estimate I have seen of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Qods Force personnel in Syria was in the neighborhood of 20,000. Soleimani's visit may presage more Qods Force personnel in Syria to assist in fighting the civil war. It may also have to do with the establishment of and security of an overland supply route for Syria and Hezbollah through Iraq. The Saudis will do whatever is necessary to block such a supply line.

Late reports indicate that the Arab League may be preparing to use military force against Assad. The al-Thani interview may be just a warning to Assad and probably is. But even a warning of perhaps the formation of an Arab League force to unseat Assad shows that the Saudi sponsored civil war is not working, at least not fast enough. I don't know what time table the Saudis are using to predict when the war goes hot but it must indicate that a critical point is about to be reached.

Expect both an Iranian reaction and a Russian reaction when this interview is broadcast. I suspect that neither reply will be hopeful. The Soviets were fully prepared to go to thermonuclear war to stop Arik Sharon's armored columns from entering Damascus and overthrowing the Hafez Assad government. I

suspect the Russians are just as serious about any outside force overthrowing the Bashar Assad government.

Which leads us to the current situation in Iraq. Iraq is also degenerating into a religious civil war between Sunnis supported by the Saudis and Shiites supported by Iran. The bombing of Shiite pilgrims began after the United States invaded Iraq and destroyed the Saddam Hussein government. Shiites were again permitted to visit the Shiite shrines in Iraq principally the Imam Ali and Imam Hussein mosques. During the early 2000s, it was common for Sunnis to set bombs to discourage Shiite pilgrims. One of the Sunni complaints was that a number of these pilgrims were actually Qods Force members.

The current conflict appears to have been started by the issuance of an arrest warrant for the Sunni vice president of Iraq on charges of running death squads several years ago. Whether this is a false charge as the vice president Hashimi has said, or a real but conveniently timed charge, is unknown. However, this warrant has led to an apparent permanent split in the politics of Iraq while Maliki is Prime Minister. I do not doubt that the Saudis are gunning for Maliki over this warrant and his attempt to push the Sunni out of political power.

I doubt that the Shiites will allow Maliki to fall. They are as intent on marginalizing the Sunnis as Hussein was at keeping the Shiites under his thumb. Right now the Kurds have come down on the side of the Sunni. Kurds are nominally Sunni but in reality mostly secular. However, they have given Hashimi sanctuary from the Iraqi government. The Iraqi Army is in no condition to challenge the Peshmerga.

It would appear that the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites will continue on a low level in Syria and Iraq for the time being. It is in neither group's interests to go to full scale civil war at this point. However, events in the Straits of Hormuz will probably dictate when such a step might be taken. Iran is aware that its planned western front against Saudi Arabia is quickly crumbling. Were Assad to pull all of his major army units out of the cities and back to the camps, it would still take several weeks to get the equipment repaired and the people trained for a combined arms assault through Jordan to the Two Mosques.

At the same time, Iraq in a quagmire renders an assault across the desert into or around Kuwait pretty much moot. Sources say that the United States currently has two infantry brigades and one helicopter regiment in Kuwait. That should probably be read as two HEAVY infantry brigades and an ASSAULT helicopter regiment. I suspect that Kuwait has sunk a few feet from the amount of supplies and equipment currently in Kuwait. I estimate that there is a complete armored corps set in Kuwait just waiting for people if the Iranians decide to cross the Shatt al-Arab.

Both sides in the religious blood letting have the ability to poke each other with a sharp stick. Right now it appears that the Iranian stick is located in the Straits of Hormuz while the Saudi stick is in Syria and Iraq. In any of these locations it only takes one misguided missile or misguided man to send us all to a very messy conflict.

Addendum: The Debka crawl is now reporting that a French Mirage and a Saudi F-15 have collided over Tabuk in northwestern Saudi Arabia. All crew members are reported safe. I think we now know where the de Gaulle is. This could also be an exercise with French aircraft visiting Tabuk. If so, the Saudis are as scared as they were when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and they let the First Tactical fighter Wing into Daharan.