British/Saudi Terror Fuels Bloody Sectarian War in Iraq and Syria

by Hussein Askary

Jan. 10—An new and ironic situation is emerging in Southwest Asia, centered around Iraq's military operation in the western Anbar Province to eliminate the al-Qaeda-type jihadist group, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria/Levant (ISIS). This coincided with a similar operation in Syria against the ISIS by both the leading Syrian rebel groups and the Syrian Army, each on its own front.

The Iraqi situation looks the most interesting, since the both the United States and Russia are providing either direct assistance or arms. This is reflective of the new dynamic that was set in motion following the chemical weapons attack in al-Ghouta, east of Damascus, on Aug. 21, 2013, which was followed by the failure of both British Prime Minister David Cameron and U.S. President Barack Obama to secure parliamentary/congressional approval and public support for a military intervention to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad, and hand over power in a fragmented country to what now has become clear are Saudi-backed terrorists and not revolutionary forces. Although no real investigation has been conducted about the culprits behind the attack in al-Ghouta, all signs point to the fact that this was a provocation staged by forces linked to Saudi Intelligence Director "Prince of Terror" Bandar bin Sultan, to create a global outcry that would have facilitated Obama's and Cameron's long-awaited war.

Cooler heads in U.S. military and foreign policy institutions intervened, after realizing that Obama was leading the world into a nuclear chicken game with Russia, and secured a negotiation process to bring the conflict in Syria to an end through political dialogue, starting with the meetings between U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, and Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov starting on Sept. 12. The Russians and Americans agreed in principle to force all the parties to the negotiating table. The Russians secured the al-Assad government's agreement to hand over its entire arsenal of chemical weapons for destruction. As this report is being written, the U.S., Denmark, and Norway are transporting the Syrian stockpile of chemical agents abroad where they will be destroyed, under the protection of Russian and Chinese warships, from Syria's Mediterranean ports. Such a situation was inconceivable a few months ago.

In the meantime, a breakthrough was achieved by the United States, Russia, and China, when they secured an agreement between Iran and the UN's P5+1 group on Iran's nuclear program. The Geneva interim agreement signed on Nov. 24, 2013, paved the way for lifting the brutal economic sanctions imposed for years on Iran, temporarily (at least) put an end to U.S. (and Israeli) threats to launch military strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities, and opened the door for constructive regional security cooperation between the major powers and Iran on such sensitive situations as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The Russians have argued that Iran, being a key player in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, should be invited to the Geneva II conference on Syria, which is scheduled to start on Jan. 22. The Saudis and the French in particular, after France received an offer from the Saudis to buy French weapons (on behalf of Lebanon) for $3 billion, have been emphatic on excluding Iran.

Behind al-Maliki's Call for 'World War III Against Terrorism'

In 2013, more than 9,000 Iraqis were killed in terror attacks, a horrific figure not seen since 2008, when terror attacks intended to inflame sectarian tensions were launched in Iraq. It was foreign fighters of the al-Qaeda brand who pulled the triggers, not Iraqi Shias or Sunnis. However, the net result of the continued targeting of Shia and Sunni mosques and religious activities divided the country along sectarian lines.

This new phenomenon in Iraq was fed by the U.S.-Saudi agreement in November 2006, following a visit

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry (left) and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met in Geneva on Sept. 12, in a coordinated effort to end the bloody conflict in Syria.

by U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney to Saudi Arabia, to establish a "Sunni Alliance" led by Saudi Arabia and consisting of the Persian Gulf countries (United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait), Jordan, and Egypt (in addition to the Sunnis in Lebanon and Iraq) to counter what became popularized as the "Shia Crescent" of Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran and Syria had long been on the "regime-change list" of the Bush Administration and the British government, following the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Having failed to crush the armed resistance in western Iraq, especially in the predominantly Sunni Anbar Province, where the now legendary resistance city of Fallujah is located, the U.S. Administration in 2007 resorted to the strategy called the "surge." Part of that strategy, which the U.S. commander of the Multinational Force in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, implemented, was to give the Sunni tribes in Anbar Province and other areas greater autonomy regarding security and policing functions in their areas, on condition that they stop attacking U.S. forces or providing safe havens for al-Qaeda terrorists who were attacking U.S. forces. The tribes that came under the "surge" umbrella were armed and financed, becoming a major force in their regions rivaling the Shia-dominated central government in Baghdad. This further strengthened the sectarian divide.

After the Cheney-Saudi agreement in 2006, Saudi money and Wahhabi extremist preachers had started pouring into western Iraq, refocusing the attention of the previously anti-Western patriotic Sunni resistance groups on the new danger, "Iran and its puppet" Shia government in Baghdad, which were described as greater dangers to Sunni Arabs than the United States, or even Israel. With the gradual withdrawal of the U.S. forces from Iraq in 2009-11, this "new target" became more and more visible. With the advance of the NATO regime-change crusade from Libya to Syria in 2011, western Iraq became an important supply route for weapons, money, and terrorists from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf (in addition to the "ratline" from Libya to Syria via Turkey). Western Iraq and Syria became one operational theater for the Saudi-backed terrorist groups.

When the Iraqi central government, backed by Iran (which was also backing the Syrian government), attempted to intervene in western Iraq to prevent it from becoming part of the war on Syria, an outcry was heard from the Saudi and Qatari media, that the Shia government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad has waged war on the Sunni people of Iraq. The trigger for the massive terror wave in Iraq was pulled when Iraqi government forces attempted to stop a protest in the Sunni city of al-Hawija in April 2013. Tens of protesters (many of them armed) and Iraqi soldiers were killed. In extreme Sunni circles and media all around the Muslim world, this was portrayed as a massacre of Sunni civilians which called for a response from all Sunnis against the Shia/Iranian enemy. Terrorists poured back into Iraq from Syria, where they were being supported by the Western "Friends of Syria" as freedom fighters, and other countries, to perpetrate new carnage in the streets and markets of Iraq.

The Iraqi government appealed to the United States and other Western powers to help it against the al-Qaeda terrorists in western Iraq, but to no avail. Obviously, those terrorists were seen by the West as still useful in Syria, and therefore not to be antagonized.

The Iraqi government had planned since early 2013,

FIGURE 1

headed a large Iraqi security and foreign policy delegation to Washington in February 2013, to solicit support for this operation. The Obama Administration's alliance with al-Qaeda and its Anglo-Saudi backers, in hopes of ousting the Assad regime in Syria, prevented that cooperation. Typical of the attitude in Washington at the time was an assessment by British analyst Michael Knights of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), in which he warned Washington not to listen to the Iraqi officials. "Washington should also push back on Baghdad's emerging narrative that Sunni protests in Iraq are simply 'spillover from Syria,' as National Security Advisor Falih al-Fayadh intimated on February 25," Knights wrote. "His statement that 'the divisiveness in Syria might affect the unity of Iraq' conceals the fact that Baghdad's own failure to support sectarian reconciliation since 2009 has been a key driver of Sunni unrest and should be corrected."[1]

Following the new Russian-U.S. approach to the Syrian crisis, creating a new dynamic in the region, the Iraqi government made new attempts to pursue this issue. Prime Minister al-Maliki visited the U.S. in late October 2013. In a speech at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington, he urged more support from the U.S. to counter al-Qaeda. "We will defeat the terrorists by our local efforts and our partnership with the United States. We were partners and we shed blood together while fighting terrorists," said al-Maliki.

to launch a major military operation in western Iraq, to seal the border with Syria to prevent the movement of terrorists between the two countries, and gradually clean out the vast desert where the ISIS and other al-Qaeda-connected groups were building their camps and logistical bases. However, without support from the United States and neighboring countries, the Iraqi Army would not be able to carry out such a large operation, especially as the Sunni tribes in Anbar Province's major cities, Fallujah and Ramadi, were passive at best, and the worst elements of those tribes were providing safe havens for the terrorists.

Iraqi National Security Advisor Faleh al-Fayad

1. Michael Knights, "Syrian and Iraqi Conflicts Show Signs of Merging," WINEP, March 7, 2013,

"We want an international war against terrorism. . . . If we have had two World Wars, we want a third world war against those who are killing people, killing populations, who are calling for bloodshed, for ignorance and do not want logic to govern our daily lives," he added.

The Obama Administration gave a very cold reception to al-Maliki and his requests for U.S. military aid, especially Apache helicopter gunships and Predator drones.

Three Bombings in Volgograd

Al-Maliki's call for a war on terrorism has found a response in Moscow following the two suicide bombings in the Russian city of Volgograd on Dec. 29 and 30, 2013, which claimed the lives of 34 people and wounded hundreds more. The attacks were carried out by jihadist groups from the Caucasus that are directly tied to the Saudi-sponsored global terror networks, and are active in Syria now. The reaction of the Russian leadership pointed in the same direction as al-Maliki's view: that terrorism is a global problem that can only be dealt with globally.

In late December, the Iraqi Army launched its long-planned operation in Anbar Province, starting in the desert areas adjacent to the Syrian border. This time, however, it seemed that the United States and Russia were joining hands with Iraq against what has now become a common enemy, by providing the Iraqi government with weapons and "information" to back the massive operation to uproot the ISIS. The Iraqi Army deployed almost all its available forces to that area.

The Iraqi Army has now received Hellfire missiles and even Scan Eagles reconnaissance drones from the United States, in addition to night-fighting equipment. This is admitted officially by both the Iraqi Army and the U.S. State Department as being part of the "Strategic Framework Agreement" between the two countries, which makes it mandatory for both parties to help each other. What is denied is that there is U.S. involvement in direct surveillance and air cover operations, although the United States has been flying drones over Iraq for years.

Russia put the delivery of advanced MI-35 gunship helicopters on fast-track delivery to Iraq in late November, and is reportedly participating in the operations against the ISIS terrorists. The Iraqi government has denied, however, that Russian pilots or military personnel are participating in the Anbar operation.

According to Iraqi sources, Saudi Arabia and Turkey had refused to authorize U.S. airplanes or drones to launch attacks on "Sunnis" in western Iraq from their territories. Saudi Arabia and Turkey have been deeply involved in support of the al-Qaeda networks inside Syria. The supply lines for the Syrian rebels from Saudi Arabia pass through the triangle between northern Saudi Arabia, eastern Jordan, and western Iraq. The al-Qaeda terrorists' aim was to establish Islamic states on both sides of the border between Iraq and Syria. Thus the Western and Saudi aid to the Syrian rebels became part of the sectarian war in Iraq.

From its side of the border, the Syrian Army has launched another offensive to regain the strategic city of Deir Ez-Zour on the Euphrates River. The city and its surroundings have been controlled alternately by ISIS and other Saudi-backed terrorist and rebel groups such as the "Islamic Front" and Jabhat al-Nusra. The Syrian Army has reportedly driven out these groups from the majority of towns around Deir Ez-Zour, after major advances against these armed groups in Homs and Aleppo. A Chechnian ISIS leader, Omar al-Shishani,[2] has reportedly moved with his forces from Aleppo to Deir Ez-Zour to support the other groups.

On to the Cities

The Iraqi Army's operation in Anbar is backed by the majority of the Iraqi people. However, a moment of uncertainty and fear emerged in the last days of 2013, which was portrayed in the international media as the beginning of Shia-Sunni civil war all over Iraq. On Dec. 26, an Iraqi anti-terror unit clashed with the family of a well-known Sunni parliamentarian from Anbar, Ahmad al-Alwani. Al-Alwani's brother, who was the real target of the raid according to Iraqi police, was killed in the action, together with several others from al-Alwani tribe. Al-Alwani was the main leader of the "Sunni" protest camp in Ramadi, Anbar Province, and clearly a provocateur against the government of Prime Minister al-Maliki. He used anti-Iran and anti-Shia rhetoric in his speeches at the protest square.

2. Al-Shishani's real name is Tarkhan Batirashvili, an ethnic Chechen from Pankisi Valley in Georgia. He was promoted to sergeant in a special Georgian military intelligence unit that participated in the Russia-Georgia War in 2008. Batirashvili helped Chechen mujahideen cross the border into Russia from the NATO-friendly Georgia for several years before he moved to Syria.
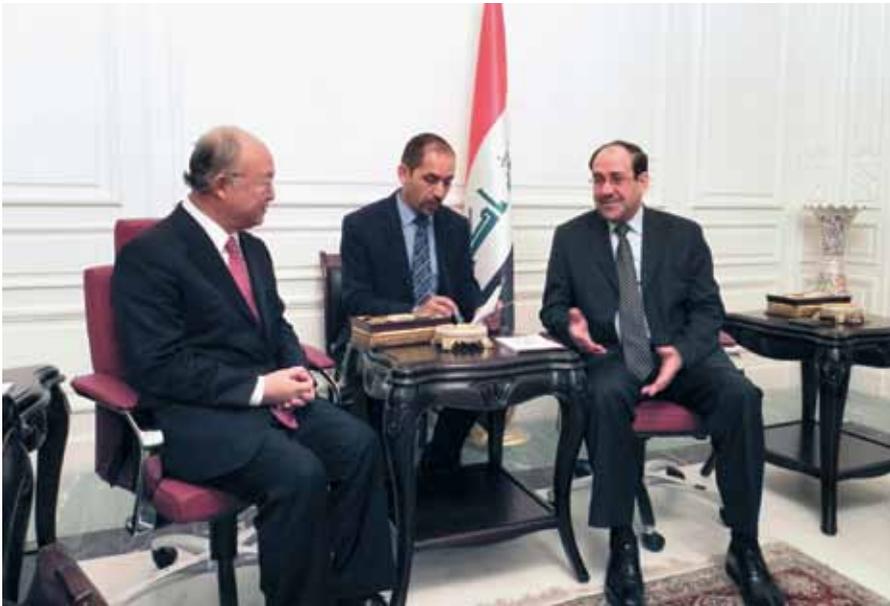
Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's move against al-Qaeda operations in Anbar Province was not an election campaign stunt, but a well-calculated move coordinated with regional and international powers. Here he is shown (right) receiving IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano in Baghdad, November 2012.

The Iraqi government had claimed that the protest camp has become a recruitment and logistical base for al-Qaeda suicide operations, because the Iraqi Army and security forces are prevented from coming close to it by the Sunni tribes in the area. Several tribes are supportive of the protest camp and even of al-Qaeda. However, the majority of the Sunni tribes oppose the sectarian nature of these protests, but have had to accept them for fear of retaliation by al-Qaeda, which has assassinated many tribal leaders who have cooperated with the central government.

The Iraqi Army then moved into Ramadi and removed the protest camp. New protests were launched. However, what was not known to the media is that the al-Maliki government had struck a deal with the leading tribes in Anbar Province, to work together to clean out ISIS and al-Qaeda from the major cities, in return for the same autonomy privileges they had enjoyed after Petraeus's "surge" operation. It was also clear that the Saudi-created "Sunni Alliance" was in shambles after the U.S.-Russian agreement to resolve the Syrian crisis without war, and was unable to oppose this massive military move, especially as it involves the world's two largest military powers.

At the time of writing, the Sunni tribes in Ramadi have regained control of the city from the al-Qaeda mi-

litiamen, and were moving to retake Fallujah. The Iraqi Army remains outside the cities to prevent provocations, and is focusing on hunting the al-Qaeda terrorists as they leave the city.

Now in hindsight, it is clear that al-Maliki was not making a gamble or an election campaign stunt, but a well-calculated move coordinated with regional and international powers.

The Sunni tribes of western Iraq are true patriots. They were simply pushed into the sectarian corner after the Blair-Bush demolition of the Iraqi modern nation-state, of which they were a key element, in 2003. The only thing they have been offered is survival, if they join one geopolitical game or the other. Now that the Anglo-Saudi drive for religious war has been exposed, they can once again become part of Iraq, working with the Shia, Christians, Kurds, and Turkmen, and other religious groups to rebuild their nation.

The Saudi Option in Syria

The Saudi reaction to the emerging U.S.-Russian coordination, at least on Syria, which became more emphatic after the operation in Iraq, is being felt in Volgograd in Russia, in Lebanon, as well as in Xinjiang in western China, where Islamist factions are being activated again, to carry out bombings, assassinations, and destabilization. In Syria itself, the Saudis promised in September that they would go their own way, creating a new army in Syria by collecting the remnants of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), foreign jihadist terror groups, and extremist Syrian Sunni militants.

The Saudis have many different "clients" in the conflict, and they have the capability to undermine some or support some or even eliminate others. Already in September, the usually united anti-Assad multitude of armed groups started quarreling over control of specific towns, resources, and arms depots, especially in the border areas with Turkey from which arms and money were shipped into Syria. In November, the ISIS clashed with a group of the Free Syrian

Army north of Idlib, near the border with Turkey. The commander of the FSA was kidnapped and reportedly beheaded later. This triggered clashes between the ISIS and many other factions, especially around Aleppo, where the Syrian Army is carrying out a massive attack to retake the city from the armed opposition groups. Other pro-al-Qaeda groups have also come under the joint fire of opposition factions and the Syrian Army. There is, of course, no coordination between the two.

The Saudis, in anticipation of the Geneva II talks, or the sabotage of thereof, are rearranging the forces inside Syria by creating a new, sanitized Sunni "Islamic Army" or "Islamic Front," "devoid of al-Qaeda," to become the chief rival of Assad's government and army. This new force is now called "the moderate opposition," in the United States and Europe, which will now presumably resume sending "non-lethal" aid to this "moderate opposition." The Saudis and their supporters in the West hope that this new force will take over as much as possible of northeastern, eastern, and southern Syria before the Geneva II negotiations start.

The *New York Times* on Dec. 9, in an article titled "U.S. Considers Resuming Nonlethal Aid to Syrian Opposition," the U.S. administration "has signaled a willingness to talk to the Islamic Front," but the Front declined to attend a meeting with low-level State Department officials, because they wanted to talk to U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert S. Ford, who has been coordinating the U.S. contact with the Syrian opposition in exile and on the ground inside Syria from Istanbul. Ford has recently been rumored to have met with the leadership of the Islamic Front.

Many of the foreign fighters making up the bulk of the ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, mostly Chechens, Afghanis, Pakistanis, Saudis, North Africans, and many European youth, are being told to either abandon their extreme "takfiri-jihadist" beliefs and join under the Islamic Front banner, or leave the country. The reality is that those who would not join this new army would probably be redeployed to other theaters after receiving training in irregular warfare and dehumanization operations. Such theaters are the Caucasus, Western China, and even Western Europe.

The new Syrian "Army of Islam" or "Islamic Front" is intended to become a "Sunni" army inside Syria, to eradicate the previously established idea that the Syrian Army is of and for all Syrians—Sunni, Shia, Alawites, Druz, and Christians. This new army's connection to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states is clear. Its leader, Zahran Alloush, admitted in an interview with the London-based Saudi daily *al-Hayat* on Nov. 21, that he had been in Saudi Arabia recently, and that his group receives funds from "private donors" in Kuwait. His position on the Geneva II talks is vague, and will depend on which direction the events on the ground in Iraq and Syria take.

It is obvious that the war on Syria has failed to achieve its goal of regime-change. If Iraq recovers from the past few years of sectarian carnage fueled by outside forces, and if the U.S. and Russia continue their cooperation in this region to eliminate the disease of Anglo-Saudi "jihadism" and nihilist terrorism, the first steps away from the brink of Hell will be taken. However, since this is a global force, which will spread its tentacles elsewhere in the world, as it did in 9/11 in the United States, in Russia, Paris, Madrid, and the London subways, it has to be dealt with as such. Exposing and eliminating the role of Saudi Arabia and its British protectors would be the single-most important step.