The New Mesopotamia: A NEW SPATIAL ORDER

A Wikistrat crowdsourced simulation

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In light of the ongoing crisis in Iraq, Wikistrat launched and completed a 48-hour crowdsourced simulation called “The New Mesopotamia”. During the simulation, analysts were asked to identify and explore the geopolitical axes that are likely to emerge in Iraq over the next two years, and to forecast a range of scenarios for how each axis would shape the region.

BACKGROUND

With the recent capture of the Iraqi cities of Mosul and Tikrit by the militant organization known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Iraq faces a greater-than-ever risk of fragmentation along ethnic and religious lines, a fate that has already befallen its neighbor Syria. The modern-day borders in the region known in ancient times as Mesopotamia – borders first outlined by the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement and maintained by authoritarian rulers, international norms and U.S.-led coalition forces for more than two decades – are now on the verge of unraveling. With the absence of a strong regional power to impose order, Mesopotamia is embarking on a new era of uncertainty and instability that will introduce new alliances, new actors and a new spatial order – in effect, a new Mesopotamia.

In this simulation, Wikistrat asked its analytic community to explore the region’s dynamics not from the perspective of nation-states (i.e., Iraq and Syria) but from the perspective of the region’s significant geopolitical axes: the radical Sunnis, the Shi’a, the Kurds and the world powers that depend greatly on the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf.

Each of these axes represents a system of actors sharing similar values and objectives regarding the region’s future – at least for the time being. Over the next two years, these axes will conflict with each other to create new realities that will change the face of the Middle East. While it is not possible to predict discrete winners and losers, it is useful to examine the dynamics of these axes in order to identify the range of possible outcomes two years hence.

ABOUT US

Wikistrat is the world’s first crowdsourced consultancy. It leverages a global network of subject-matter experts via a patent pending “Collaborative Competition” methodology to provide a variety of analytic services. Scenario generation, policy planning, risk assessment and red-teaming exercises are conducted by Wikistrat on a real-time, interactive online platform.
RADICAL SUNNI AXIS

ISIS and its allies are proceeding to carve out a Sunni heartland between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, stretching from Syria to the gates of Baghdad. The organization has demonstrated meticulous governance and administrative capabilities as it consolidates its gains, suggesting longevity and an ability for self-reliance. With each ISIS victory, the organization gains new resources and supporters; these supporters include foreign fighters from Syria, as well as Iraqi Sunnis who were disenfranchised by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s Shi’a-dominated government. ISIS has also demonstrated their capability in managing Syria’s oil fields, suggesting that it will be able to effectively operate captured Iraqi energy assets.

As the United States and the Taliban have both learned in Afghanistan, conquering is easy but governing is hard. Over the next few years, ISIS will find it a challenge to govern a landlocked “Mesopotamian Caliphate” while facing Shi’a enemies on its eastern and western flanks and engaging in a wary peace with Sunni Kurds to the north – this all while maintaining harmony among the diverse Sunni tribes under its control. To paraphrase the old NATO aphorism, ISIS has to keep the Sunnis down and the Shi’a out. While Sunni Iraqis may accept ISIS control and the constraints of strict Sharia law in return for peace and stability, experience indicates that tribes will chafe under such rule, leading to intense rounds of internecine conflict and suppression. Alternatively, ISIS could broaden its appeal by shifting from a severe interpretation of Sharia to a broad Pan-Sunni/Anti-Shi’a “big tent” ideology, thus widening the influence of this axis. This shift would be in keeping with ISIS’s desire to intensify its attacks on Shi’a holy sites and communities.

In all likelihood, the new Sunni heartland in Mesopotamia will remain unconquerable (by the outside) but also ungovernable (by ISIS). The majority of moderate Sunnis do not support the brutal and violent conduct of ISIS and would likely stand against them once other viable political choices are available. A continued unwillingness to share power by Iraq’s Shi’a-led government would foreclose the option of reunification, leaving Sunnis no choice but to fight for their own nationalism.

Lastly, ISIS has no natural foreign allies, merely its own considerable revenues and informal funding from the Gulf States. (Even the Taliban arguably has Pakistan.) Within the Sunni Axis, different factions will rise and fall based on their competence and the outside world’s “flavor-of-the-month” patronage.

All things considered, two years from now, Iraq’s Sunni heartland could look just as bloody and complex as Syria’s.
**SHI’A AXIS**

As the legitimately elected government of Iraq, the Nouri Al-Maliki administration seeks to reassert its governing authority over the entirety of Iraqi territory, restoring its control over the Sunni heartland and bringing the Kurds back into the fold. Unlike the Sunni Axis, wherein the center of gravity will continue to be amorphous, Iran will dominate the Shi’a Axis and the weak Iraqi government and security forces. Iran is not only bringing its own forces to bear in Iraq by deploying Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds forces, but it could bring pressure to bear on the Sunni Axis through proxy forces in Syria and Lebanon.

Despite the ideological weight and tangible firepower that Iran brings to the conflict, the Shi’a Axis will be hard pressed to reassert authority over the Sunni heartland. Its priority will be protecting Baghdad (now a mostly Shi’a city), the oil sector and its critical infrastructure, religious sites (which ISIS has threatened to target) and the majority Shi’a population from Basra to Baghdad. Although the Shi’a Axis will seek to fracture the Sunni Axis by exploiting natural fissure points, the Shi’a Axis has little standing to reacquire lost territory – its army is Shi’a and its leader is a noted Shi’a sectarian. Even jettisoning Maliki as Prime Minster may be “too little, too late” for fence-mending purposes.

Iran also may be reaching the limits of its ability to influence the shape of the New Mesopotamia. Its Quds forces are engaged on multiple fronts in Lebanon (through Hezbollah), Syria (in support of the Assad regime) and now in Iraq. It also faces unknown domestic turmoil from dissidents, inflamed by the hardships caused by international sanctions. Overreaching abroad could lead to internal instability inside Iran, which would preclude it from putting a sufficient force in Iraq to completely roll back ISIS. Functionally, it can do little more than help Iraq hold a line in the sand around Baghdad.
KURDISH AXIS

The retreat of the Iraqi Army in the wake of attacks by ISIS strengthens the position of Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), especially in light of its capture of oil-rich Kirkuk from Islamist forces that had just overrun the Iraqi Army. With strong revenues, a coherent government, a robust security force and additional autonomy from Baghdad, the KRG stands to serve as a northern Sunni buffer from the jihadist turmoil in Mesopotamia, protecting Turkey's southern and Iran's northern flank. Potential reconciliation (or at least a reduction in the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran) would further strengthen the KRG's hand. Over a two-year horizon, one can anticipate a closer relationship between Iraqi Kurds and Turkey (based on oil), a continued close relationship between Assad and the Syrian Kurds and a modestly deteriorating relationship between Erdoğan and Turkish Kurds. As one Kurdish official said, "It is a very nice time to be Kurdish."

Given ISIS's focus on its fight with the Shi'a (as evidenced by their lack of conflict with the Kurds) and the defensive posture of the Shi'a Axis, the Kurdish Axis has the luxury of being able to adopt a defensive posture while consolidating its gains in territory and autonomy. The Iraqi Kurds could try to extend their territorial control to the Tigris River (the boundaries of "historical" Kurdistan) but only if security conditions are permissive. Mosul and Kirkuk, which have substantial Sunni-Arab populations, could be potential flash points.

The consolidation of Iraqi, Syrian, Turkish and Iranian Kurds under one state or even a push for independence by Iraqi Kurds is unlikely in the short term. Political and cultural differences among the various Kurdish groups will forestall unification, and the KRG is likely to pursue a policy of developing its economy (already good, but likely to be turbocharged with Kirkuk oil), solidifying its economic relationship with Turkey and other nations, and ensuring that its sudden autonomy is made irreversible. It will also seek to stay out of the Sunni-Shi'a fight, unless its vital interests are challenged. Turkey's previous willingness to bypass Baghdad in order to develop relations with the KRG bodes well for developing deeper ties now, provided the KRG does not agitate for full independence. The KRG's relationship with the United States, already strong since 1991, will deepen as the U.S. seeks to influence the region while navigating difficult relationships with radical Sunnis and Iranian-backed Shi'a.
AXIS OF NATIONS

Major importers of Iraqi oil will side with the Shi’a Axis but only to the extent that sides must be chosen. As the world’s leading petroleum importer (42 percent of its imports coming from the Middle East), China will lead this bloc as it has the most at stake. Japan and India, both major importers, will follow events closely as well. Although China and Iraq are not key trading partners, China looks forward to helping Iraq develop its fields to fuel its own development needs. China, along with other dependent Asian nations, has every interest in facilitating a stable Mesopotamia that is ripe for drilling and refining investment.

Of the great powers already operating in the region, only the United States has the ability to project force by sea and air – and, if necessary, by land. Although the United States has multiple objectives in the region (e.g., preventing Iran from developing nuclear capabilities and containing the spread of radical Sunni jihad), its primary goal is to keep the gas pumps open for the world economy, which means helping the Shi’a and Kurdish Axes protect their oil assets from ISIS interference. In this matter, U.S. interests align with China, Iran, Turkey, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the Kurds. Lastly, the United States is also publicly committed to defending the territorial integrity of Iraq – an even more difficult task now given the expansion of ISIS.

While these goals are consistent with international norms and longstanding policy, the United States will be hard-pressed to develop a set of policies to achieve them – or, indeed, to find allies in support of even pursuing them. Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are tainted by their support for anti-Assad rebels and are hated in Baghdad. Unless (or until) the Radical Sunni Axis extends its reach beyond the Tigris and Euphrates, the U.S. will also face difficulty in forming a coalition to neutralize these entities. Washington's best bet may lie in developing a tactical alliance with Iran, the country with the most at stake.
STRATEGIC TAKEAWAYS

1. Iraq has essentially broken into three component parts, each dominated by a relatively homogenous religious or ethnic group that is at the same time linked to other neighboring groups. Unlike Syria, which has broken into a patchwork of fiefdoms, Iraq’s three components appear capable enough to defend their territory but weak enough not to encroach on each other. Efforts made to reunite Iraq will probably be fruitless, although opportunities exist to influence the Radical Sunni and Shi’a Axes to adopt more moderate, nonsectarian positions.

2. Priorities should focus on maintaining Iraq’s reliability as an energy producer, which means protecting the Shi’a in the south and the Kurds in the north. Efforts also must be made to prevent ISIS from metastasizing to Jordan and the Gulf States.

3. An acknowledgment that the map of Mesopotamia is being redrawn indigenously into Sunni, Shi’a and Kurdish belts (amplified by concern over the common threat posed by radical Sunnis) could result in a more cooperative and responsible Sunni-Shi’a rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

4. This crisis is inducing the United States and Iran to cooperate over the defense of Baghdad – cooperation that could positively affect talks on Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

5. Saudi Arabia and Iran have taken initial steps to resolve regional proxy conflicts. A common radical enemy could lead to strange bedfellows – a relationship the United States may be well-positioned to broker. A Saudi-Iran relationship focused on respecting spheres of influence and combatting nihilistic extremism would be an unexpected but welcome outcome from the tragedy unfolding in Iraq.

6. Unable to project power into the region, and being dependent on the United States Navy keeping the sea lanes open, China would be amenable to any deal that kept its oil flowing, and would be especially happy over any diminishment of the hostilities between Iran and the United States.

7. The global economy depends upon a reliable supply of energy products from Iraq and the rest of the Persian Gulf. The tumult in Mesopotamia will affect global energy market prices and availability, with both short- and long-term resulting effects. Instability has already caused oil prices to rise. Unless Baghdad and oil production locations further south fall to hostile forces, energy prices should fluctuate within current ranges, especially if Saudi Arabia increases production to offset Iraqi interruptions. Internally, Iraq will suffer from insufficient refining capacity following the attacks on its major refining facility in Baiji.

8. Developing Iraq’s oil production over the next decade is a greater concern, since much of the developing world, especially China, is counting on increased production to fuel development. Kurdish development of oil resources around Kirkuk will help bolster world oil supplies (and help Turkey both meet its domestic needs and become a regional supplier) but significant investment is needed to improve pipeline delivery from Iraq to Turkey. Investment to exploit southern oil resources, which were finally rebounding, will probably go back on hold until security stabilizes.

ATTRIBUTIONS

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Written by:
Jeffrey Itell

Edited by:
Steve Keller

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Contact: info@wikistrat.com

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