

# Saudi Arabia warns of civil war in Iraq with “unpredictable consequences”

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Saudi Arabia has further fuelled sectarian tensions in the Middle East with comments yesterday by Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal blaming the US-backed Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad for the escalating conflict in Iraq. He warned that the upheaval in Iraq could produce “a civil war with unpredictable consequences for the region.”

Speaking at a meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in Jeddah, the foreign minister repeated Saudi accusations that the Iraqi government’s “sectarian policies of exclusion” against the country’s Sunni Arab minority were responsible for the violence. In a thinly-veiled reference to Iran’s Shiite regime, he blamed countries with “bad intentions” toward Iraq of “plots threatening its security, stability, national unity and sense of Arab identity.”

The Saudi monarchy has long regarded Iran as its chief regional rival and has fuelled anti-Shiite and anti-Persian animosities in a bid to undermine Tehran’s regional influence. It has bitterly opposed the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, which it regards as an Iranian stooge, and politically and financially supported its Sunni opponents. Saud al-Faisal reiterated the Saudi demand for “national reconciliation” in Iraq without “foreign interference or outside agendas.”

Maliki lashed out on Tuesday against Saudi Arabia, accusing it of supporting the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and allied fighters who have swept south toward Baghdad over the past week, capturing key towns and cities. He declared that Riyadh was “responsible for supporting these groups financially and morally, and for the outcome of that, which includes crimes that may qualify as genocide: the spilling of Iraqi blood, the destruction of Iraqi state institutions and historic and religious sites.”

Various Gulf states, also ruled by Sunni monarchies, have joined Saudi Arabia in criticising Baghdad. On Sunday, Qatar’s Foreign Minister Khaled al-Attiyah accused the Maliki government of triggering the fighting by marginalising Sunni Arabs, citing its clampdown on Sunni protests in April 2013 and this January. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) announced yesterday that it was recalling its diplomatic envoy to Iraq for consultations and criticised the Iraqi government’s “sectarian policies.”

The intensifying Sunni-Shiite antagonisms throughout the region are the direct result of the criminal US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, followed by a decade of American threats and provocations against Iran, and most recently the US-backed regime-change operation against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, an Iranian ally.

Washington deliberately fomented sectarian blood-letting in Iraq as a means of propping up its occupation, profoundly destabilising the entire country. In Syria, the US funded and backed anti-Assad militias, and encouraged its Middle Eastern allies, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar, to do the same. The result is a sectarian civil war in Syria against Assad, who belongs to the Shiite Alawite sect, which has now spilled over the border into Iraq.

The Saudi monarchy has sought to distance itself from the Sunni extremists of ISIS, who were previously linked to Al Qaeda and share that group’s hostility to the corrupt Saudi ruling elites. Saudi Arabia has formally banned ISIS, but that does not mean it is not providing support, directly or indirectly.

Riyadh’s ambivalent attitude was summed up in the Saudi newspaper *Asharq Al Awsat*, whose columnist declared last weekend: “Nouri al-Maliki is worse, and more dangerous, than ISIS and [Al] Qaeda.”

Saudi Arabia has also been critical of the US decision to call off its air war in Syria last September, as well as Washington's moves toward a rapprochement with Iran. Riyadh is concerned that the latest US-Iranian talks over Iraq could result in joint efforts to prop up the Maliki government in Baghdad. "We need a regional coordination over Iraq, not a US-Iranian dialogue," Saudi analyst Abdel Aziz al-Sagr told Agence France Presse.

Saudi Arabia is not about to break ties with Washington. In April, intelligence chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan was removed from his post, apparently over his remarks warning of a "major shift" away from the US following its failure to bomb Syria. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Saudi Arabia, especially its intelligence services, has stepped up operations inside Iraq, Syria and throughout the Middle East to back a range of Sunni organisations in a bid to undermine Iranian influence.

In a comment entitled "The intrigue lying behind Iraq's jihadist uprising," Stratfor, a think tank with close ties to the US military and intelligence establishment, said regional powers, including Turkey, Iran and the Gulf States, were all pressing their interests in Iraq. In relation to Saudi Arabia, it said "a Persian-American rapprochement is a living nightmare for the Sunni kingdom," making Syria, Lebanon and Iraq "useful proxy battlegrounds."

The Stratfor article noted that while Saudi Arabia might not directly support ISIS, it had close connections with other Iraqi Sunni organisations involved in the fighting. "Most of the Sunni militias and the growing number of Awakening Council (Sunni fighters recruited by the US to battle Al Qaeda in Iraq) defectors joining these militias coordinate directly with the Majlis Thuwar al Anbar (Anbar insurgents' council), which coordinates with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant [Syria] on a selective basis. Saudi Arabia's acting intelligence chief, Yousef bin Ali al Adrisi, is believed to be in direct communication with the Majlis Thuwar al Anbar, affording Riyadh the opportunity to influence the shape of the battlefield—and thereby aggravate Iran in a highly sensitive spot."

Previously, ISIS and other anti-Assad militias in Syria received substantial financial support and arms from wealthy Sunni donors in Saudi Arabia and the

Gulf states, to which their governments and the US turned a blind eye. An extensive Brookings Institute report published last December explained that much of this funding passed through Kuwait. "Although it is impossible to quantify the value of private Kuwaiti assistance to [Syrian] rebels, it almost certainly reaches into the hundreds of millions of dollars," it stated. "Donors based in Kuwait have also gathered contributions from elsewhere in the Gulf, where fund raising is more closely regulated ... The US Treasury is aware of this activity and has expressed concern about this flow of private financing. But Western diplomats' and officials' general response has been a collective shrug."

The rapid descent of Iraq toward sectarian civil war is an indictment of the recklessness, barbarism and incoherence of Washington's foreign policy, which has been based above all on the use of military force to prosecute its imperialist interests. In Iraq, the US installed a Shiite regime, putting it at odds with its allies in the Persian Gulf. In Syria, it encouraged Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States to fuel a civil war against Iran's ally, Assad. All of this has created a sectarian tinderbox throughout the Middle East that threatens to drag the region into a bloodbath.



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