



Osama Bin Laden's goal in 9/11 was to suck the US into Afghanistan and Iraq, sparking a regional conflagration that would sweep away the imperial legacy and establish a new caliphate. Over a decade later, this plan is still on track. As he led his jihadists triumphantly into Mosul and declared an emirate on Iraq-Syrian territory, ISIS 'caliph' Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced that the 1916 secret Sykes-Picot Agreement between Britain, France and imperial Russia was at last being dismantled.

The US and Saudis now face an intractable dilemma.

- For the US, allowing the local al-Qaeda rebels to consolidate their hold on Sunni Iraq and northern Syria means the complete failure of their post-9/11 strategy of creating a new Middle East under their hegemony.
- For the Saudis, it means risking the very existence of the Saudi state itself.

### Sykes-Picot and Saudi Arabia

All of the Middle East states, including Saudi Arabia, were founded as a result of the disintegration of the Ottoman Caliphate at the end of WWI and the Sykes-Picot Agreement that effectively abolished the Ottoman caliphate (Turkey's new secular leader formalized this in 1924), dividing it into British-French "mandates" and eventually nation states. The prickly Saudis did not suffer the humiliation of direct occupation, but they followed the imperial agenda.

Saudi control of the Arabian peninsula was not what the British had in mind. The British had hoped that the Hashemites could consolidate power over the holy cities Mecca and Medina.

They nominally ruled Mecca at the time—Hussein as Emir of Mecca (1908–1917) and his son Abdullah, as deputy for Mecca from 1909–1914 in the Ottoman legislature. In 1917 Hussein was internationally recognized as king of the Kingdom of Hejaz.

Against all odds, the Saud tribe, followers of the ultraconservative Wahhab, defied the British and occupied Mecca in 1924, using an elite corps of jihadists—the Ikhwan—which Saud leader Abdul Aziz organized in 1912 for this purpose (not to be confused with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood founded in 1928). The British had no choice but to accede to this *fait accompli*, and abandoned their original plan involving the more westernized Hashemites.

However, the Ikhwan jihadists were then betrayed by Abdul Aziz and his new patrons—yes, the very same British—in 1929. The Ikhwan were not happy with Sykes-Picot, which the Saud leader accepted, as it allowed him to establish a tribal monarchy (under imperialist hegemony) to govern the Muslim world.

The Saudis and even more so the Ikhwan were the ISIS of the day—ruthless fighters who slaughter their enemies as ‘unbelievers’, determined to impose their Wahhab-inspired austere Islam on all Muslims. The Saudis were known for their thorough plundering and merciless killings, their raids being “deadlier than traditional Bedouin raids, which usually avoided killing for fear of triggering a blood feud,” according to historian Vernon Egger.

For almost a century now, the Saudis have been able to square the circle, reconciling their role within the empire with their primitive Wahhabism. But they have had their day. Al-Qaeda and now ISIS find their inspiration not with the compromised Saudis but the Ikhwan rebels (followers of Wahhab, but with his militancy restored, and as such dubbed “neo-Wahhabis”).

Just as the first Saudi King Abdul Aziz, supported by the Ikhwan, swept away the more complacent Hashemites and Ottomans/ British, Bin Laden/ ISIS would sweep away the now complacent Saudi royal family, grown fat on its oil wealth, and its US sponsors. Saudi control of the holy cities provides a poor echo of the once powerful Islamic civilization, and the “neo-Wahhabis” know it.

A rump caliphate

The yearning for a revival of the caliphate is predominantly a Sunni one. Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT, Party of Liberation) was founded by Palestinians and Jordanians in 1953, advocating the revival of the Ottoman Caliphate. It was/is supported by Saudi Arabia (though it does not openly operate in Saudi Arabia).

The whole nineteenth century reform thrust in Islam appeared to be Sunni, though reformer Jamal al-Din al-Afghani was himself Shia and his Sunni Egyptian ally Muhammad Abduh was nonsectarian, campaigning for an end to the Sunni-Shia animosity. After the Caliphate was abolished in 1924 and replaced by colonialism, Shia and Sunnis cooperated in the revivalist Khilafat Movement. Iraqi Shia ulama supported the Sunni rebellion against the British, and Persian religious scholars went to the Caliphate Conference in Jerusalem in 1931.

Sunni extremists like ISIS accuse Shia of being American agents, supporting the US in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is hardly fair. Shia parties opposed these invasions but really had no alternative, and accepted the occupations *as faits accomplis*, naturally attempting to improve their lot under the circumstances. The charge of being agents of imperialism is belied by the fact that Iran is the only outspoken Islamic critic of imperialism and is the subject of unrelenting subversion for its trouble.

However, the imperial strategy of divide and conquer has worked, and Sunni-Shia sectarianism has been consolidated to the extent that to achieve their goal of a new caliphate, ISIS is collaborating with their secular foes of yesteryear, Baathists and former military personnel, who operate as the Iraqi Islamic Army and the 1920 Revolution Brigades.

Such a strategy will achieve at best a truncated caliphate—roughly ISIS's current territory—surrounded by hostile Sunni and Shia states, which will soon be the scene of further conflict as the ex-Baathists struggle for control. Their tactical alliance with ISIS can't last. At that point, ISIS will be forced to look to their Saudi foes for support, but this again is not a stable alliance, as the Saudi betrayal of the Ikhwan in the 1920s reminds us.

This caliphate revival, the goal of Bin Laden, of HuT, and stretching back to the Ikhwan in the 1920s and Afghani in the nineteenth century, should have ended with the US invasions following 9/11, which aimed at destroying al-Qaeda and consolidating US hegemony in the region. However, the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq proved to be a boon to these

“neo-Wahhabis”, and all Obama’s horse and all of his men now look quite helpless.

By backing the Syrian insurgency, the US gave at least free rein (if not actual support) to ISIS, who presumably were only supposed to be spoilers, weaken Assad, possibly split up Syria and Iraq, but certainly not to gain power and keep it. With that now a possibility, the US is panicking, as well it should. So far, the Saudis aren’t panicking, presumably counting on using their oil wealth and anti-Shia sectarianism to let them co-opt leaders of some future Sunni Iraqi-Syrian state.

Perhaps they count on the US to drone ISIS out of existence and replace them with pro-US Sunnis. But this no longer looks like an option either. ISIS types are prepared to die in their jihad, like the Ikhwan insurgents a century ago, and it is unlikely that ISIS will be seduced by either the empire or a bankrupt monarchy.

Acceding to a rump caliphate would be the equivalent of the British making peace in the 1920s with the Ikhwan, an impossibility in terms of empire strategy. Now, as then, Saudi hegemony must be preserved. Now, as then, Saudi collapse would mean an end to imperial control over the vital region.

#### A new regional alignment

ISIS’s sectarian success is prompting calls for a nonsectarian alliance between governments in Syria, Iraq, Iran and possibly Turkey opposed to this scenario. Turkish support for the insurgency in Syria is already being seen as a mistake, encouraging Kurdish separatism, and Turkey’s Islamists have no truck with ISIS. A proposal by Diako Hosseini of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Institute for Political and International Studies is the establishment of a rapid deployment force by the neighboring countries of Iraq, centered on Iran and Turkey, which would act on the request of the Iraqi government.

What role can the US play here? Not much, as its support is the kiss of death to Iraqis seeking to extricate themselves from a decade of US occupation, and the return of its forces would be a blow to the regional powers, who should be the actors responsible for solving the region’s problems.

Such a regional alliance would stabilize the US-installed regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, though no longer under US hegemony. The rapprochement between Sunni and Shia that it implies would bring Muslims together in a way that ISIS and its sectarian caliphate cannot do. Neither the Saudi Wahhabis nor the ISIS neo-Wahhabis are capable of making this 'leap of faith'.

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