

# "Security Arc" forms amidst Mideast terror

By Sharmine Narwani - Al Akhbar Sat, 2013-12-21 19:11- Sandbox

Many observers are correct in noting that the Middle East is undergoing yet another seismic shift - that the Russian-brokered destruction of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal, a US-Iranian rapprochement, the diminished strategic value of Saudi Arabia and Israel, and a US withdrawal from Afghanistan will all contribute to changing regional dynamics considerably.

But what is this new direction? Where will it come from, who will lead it, what will define it?

It has now become clear that the new Mideast "direction" is guided primarily by the "security threat" posed by the proliferation of extremist, sectarian, Islamist fighters in numbers unseen even in [Afghanistan or Iraq](#). This shared danger has been the impetus behind a flurry of global diplomatic deals that has spawned unexpected cooperation between a diverse mix of nations, many of them adversaries.

These developments come with a unique, post-imperialist twist, though. For the first time in decades, this direction will be led from *inside* the region, by those Mideast states, groups, sects and parties most threatened by the extremism.

Because nobody else is coming to "save" the Middle East today.

As Salafist militants swarm various borders – from the Levant to the Persian Gulf to North Africa and beyond – states are disintegrating, their [territorial integrity and sovereignty](#) under threat, their institutions and economies in shambles, and their armed forces impotent against the irregular warfare practiced by these invaders.

But from within this chaos, a group of countries on the frontline of the battle has decided to give shape to a solution.

Their answer is to fight the militancy directly, to weed it out of their areas and cut off its roots. Already, they are sharing intelligence, cooperating in the battlefield with their collective resources and working to secure support from the international community.

And so while states are weakening elsewhere in the region, a security alliance is emerging out of a stretch of countries from the Levant to the Persian Gulf: *Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran*.

According to a number of informed sources in the Levant, interviewed over the course of several months, this "Security Arc" will seek to achieve several objectives: First, to maintain the territorial integrity and sovereignty of participating countries. Second, to establish rigorous military and security cooperation against immediate and future threats from extremists. Third, to forge a common political worldview that enhances the alliance and can lead to further collaboration in other arenas.

Jordan's Sunni King Abdullah once dubbed these four nations the "Shia Crescent," taking an unusually sectarian jab at the rise in influence of Shia governments and political parties in all four nations. But the security alliances now forming between the four states has little to do with common "sect." Instead, Abdullah and his allies have a direct hand in the development of this grouping:

It was, after all, the region's western-backed Arab monarchies that launched the "counter-revolution" to thwart popular Arab uprisings and re-direct them at their regional adversaries, via Syria. Qatar, [Saudi Arabia](#), Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, the UAE and their Western allies threw money, weapons, training and resources at unseating Syrian President Bashar al-Assad - in a bid to weaken Iran, isolate Hezbollah and take care of that "Shia threat" once and for all.

But in their single-minded haste to cripple foes, Arab monarchies (supported by western allies) backed any co-religionist prepared to enter the fight and ignored the sectarian, extremist ideologies that these fighters embraced. They quite [illogically calculated](#) that the militancy could be controlled once the mission was accomplished.

To quote Council on Foreign Relations Senior Fellow [Ed Husain](#) in August 2012: "The unspoken political calculation among (US) policymakers is to get rid of Assad first—weakening Iran's position in the region—and then deal with al-Qaeda later."

In the end, Assad didn't fall, Iran didn't waver, Hezbollah dug in, and the Russians and Chinese stepped into the fray. As the Syrian conflict developed into a regional geopolitical battle, heavy weapons, porous borders and increasingly sectarian rhetoric created a unique opportunity – from Lebanon to Iraq - for Salafist militants, including Al Qaeda, to gain influence and create a [highly desirable corridor](#) from the Levant to the Persian Gulf.

Former CIA Director Michael Hayden says: "The dominant story going on in Syria is a Sunni fundamentalist takeover of a significant part of the Middle East geography, the explosion of the Syrian state and of the Levant as we know it."

Today, this ideological brand of political violence marked by summary executions, suicide bombings, beheadings and sectarianism threatens to unravel the entire area and turn it into a stomping ground for "emirs" and their fiefdoms governed by Shariah law. For some, this is a price worth paying – [the Saudis](#) continue unabashedly to fund and weaponize these conflicts. Other supporters, particularly in the West, have become fearful that the jihadi march will not stop at *any* border.

But few have taken any concrete steps to inhibit – financially or militarily - the proliferation of this extremism.

And so it is left for the targeted countries to tackle the problem. The same Western-Arab axis that sought to cripple "Shia" ascendancy in the Middle East by fueling sectarianism and encouraging an armed "Sunni" reaction, has now created urgent common cause among Iranians, Syrians, Lebanese and Iraqis, based almost entirely on the "security" threat.

*A self-fulfilling prophecy, if you will.*

### **Not a Uniform Union**

In Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, there exists significant - mainly Sunni - populations that currently do not back a security union between the four states. Decades of sectarian propaganda from the GCC and west has made this demographic highly suspicious of the intentions of Shia Iran and its allies.

Although these populations are just as likely to be targeted by Salafist militants who have now killed Sunni moderates (along with Christians, Kurds and Shia) in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, their reluctance to see political foes gain influence has often meant they have provided "cover" for

militant co-religionists and allowed them to proliferate locally. The choice is painful for this demographic: let your adversaries rise or let extremists run amok.

But earlier this year, when Hezbollah took the decision to fight openly in Qusayr, Syria alongside the Syrian army, it became clear that the parties supporting this security alliance would no longer humor the dissenters.

This Security Arc would be forged with or without the approval of naysayers. And buy-in for the security imperative is coming from an unlikely source: [the United States](#).

In the past few months, Washington has suddenly gone from backing a mostly Sunni 'rebellion' in Syria to reaching out to Iran. This about-turn stems from the realization that the US has dangerously overplayed its geopolitical game and allowed religious militancy to swell past the point of no return. Neither Washington nor its NATO partners can reverse this trend unaided. Both failed miserably in the decade-long, superficial "war on terror," which, if anything, helped [sow further seeds](#) of extremism. The US now understands that it needs the assistance of *vested* regional partners and rising powers that face a more imminent threat from militants – Iran, [Russia, China, India](#), Syria, Iraq, - not just to fight extremism, but to cut off its source...in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Yemen, Libya, Afghanistan and other places.

The Americans are in an extremely difficult position: to tackle the spread of extremists, they will have to support military and security solutions from old foes in the region – Iran, Syria, Hezbollah. For starters, this means that 30-plus years of "policy" will literally be flushed away *and* Washington risks alienating longtime regional allies. Moreover, a successful outcome, i.e. eliminating extremism, will almost certainly mean the ascendancy of Iran and the downfall of US-ally Saudi Arabia – among the many other reverberations throughout the Mideast that this will entail.

Washington's conflicting signals on the Middle East are a result of this tortured decision. Actions, however, speak louder than words: the US just struck a nuclear deal with Iran in Geneva in record time, having secretly opened direct channels of communications first. Last month, US President Barack Obama asked to meet his Iraqi counterpart Nuri al-Maliki – soon after, the US began sharing intelligence for the first time since American troops withdrew from Iraq. That first piece of intel, according to Az-Zaman, was on the movement of militants in the Anbar desert. Today, the US-Saudi relationship has soured to the point that even officials question any real convergence of interests; European ambassadors are starting to trek back to Damascus, their intelligence officials lining up to meet with their Syrian counterparts to share information on jihadists; the formidable Israelis have been shunted aside on some major Mideast decisions; NATO-member Turkey is working overtime to ease relations with Iran and Iraq. The list goes on.

These extraordinary developments would not have been feasible a mere six months ago when the blinkers were still on. The speed at which we have been ushered into a new "era of compromise" between adversaries is a testament to the extreme urgency of the jihadist/Salafist problem - and the lengths to which countries will go to address it.

Even if this means bulldozing through entrenched policy and turning it on its head.

As a senior Hezbollah source tells me: "The US is focused more on making arrangements *directly* with their opponents instead of relying on their allies." There's good reason for that. Many of Washington's regional allies are a *source* of the instability and are having to be muzzled, coerced and cajoled into accepting the new realities.

Some of these allies are political parties *within* the Security Arc. They're being brought into line more quickly now, partly because the threat of terrorism hovers in their own backyards. In Lebanon, for instance, a national army thus far restrained by pro-Saudi political interests [looks set to finally tackle Salafist militants](#) in key towns, cities and refugee camps where their numbers have swelled. That's a tremendous breakthrough after almost three years of sitting on the fence, waiting for "spillover" from Syria and taking virtually no security precautions to prevent it.

### **Security Arc: Plan of Action**

Things are moving rapidly on every front. The convergence of extremist sectarian militias into the 50,000-strong "Islamic Front" has created further common cause on the other side. The US and UK last week [withdrew support](#) for rebels, belatedly fearing radicalization of the 'rebellion.' And Iran launched [diplomatic efforts](#) in neighboring Gulf states to divide their ranks against toeing the old adversarial line, succeeding when [Oman refused to support a Saudi initiative](#) for a GCC union.

But to stamp out jihadism in Syria and beyond, *three main objectives* need to be achieved - and it will take a collective effort to get there:

First, is to weed out extremists from inside the areas where they are growing in number and influence and where political will exists: inside the Security Arc, from within Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran. This is primarily a military solution – though some fighters may surrender/exit through negotiated political outreach, or when a mentoring state/individual calls it quits.

Second, is the establishment of a global sanctions regime to financially cripple jihadist/Salafist networks by targeting their sources of funding. This is already being done in small measure, but the West's relationship with many of the violating states and individuals has prevented any genuine progress in the past. As Patrick Cockburn's recent column in [The Independent](#) "[Mass Murder in The Middle East is Funded By Our Friends The Saudis](#)" points out: "Everyone knows where Al Qaeda gets its money, but while the violence is sectarian, the West does nothing." The new US-Iranian rapprochement - fast-tracked to tackle terror - could change this, given the dramatic realignment of priorities and alliances created in its wake.

Third, is for neighboring states - and even those well beyond the region - to shut down their borders and enforce air-tight immigration security. On Syria's borders we are already seeing both Turkey and Jordan taking some drastic measures, but the Iraqi border still remains porous and dangerous. Hence, Washington's recent intel upgrade with Iraq.

### **Gravitating Toward The "Security" Priority**

You can see the calculations changing in nations beyond the Security Arc already. Many keenly understand the vital role these four countries will have to play to stem militancy. All eyes right now are on Syria where the security situation is most precarious for the region – particularly in Egypt, Jordan and Turkey.

The latter three are the regional states most likely to support the Security Arc's security objectives, albeit with reservations that accompany some fairly stark political differences.

Jordan, for example, has played "host" to an array of foreign special forces, troops, intelligence agencies and contractors, all focused on the task of bringing down the current Syrian government. But even its longtime financial dependency on Saudi Arabia is not worth the thousands of jihadis stationed on Jordanian territory, waiting to enter conflict zones. Arab media puts the number of

Jordanian-origin jihadists inside the country at a horrifying 1,000. By contrast, the Europeans are terrified of even a *handful* of their own Islamist militants coming home.

According to a well-connected Lebanese source, around four months ago, Jordan, Syria and Iraq began quiet discussions (on separate bilateral tracks) about economic and security cooperation. The Jordanians initially balked at the security upgrade, but came around eventually. They're not just worried about extremism, but about economic collapse too – either can set the other off. Worst of all would be complete irrelevance in a region undergoing rapid change. The Jordanians are not mavericks, and sandwiched as they are between Syria and Iraq, it is not hard to see their new direction.

Already, state security courts in Amman are imprisoning prominent Salafists and Jordanian fighters intent on crossing over into Syria. Jordan has shut down its border, enforced tight security around the Zaatari camp for Syrian refugees, and is likely to take further measures as relations with the Syrian government continue to improve.

The Turks have also taken measures to tighten up their borders – [in practice](#). An internal battle still rages within its Islamist establishment where a hot-headed Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan cast his lot almost three years ago with the Syrian opposition. His intransigence on this issue has cost Turkey: armed militants have found refuge inside Turkey's border with Syria, political violence has seeped into the country, Turkey's [popularity has plummeted](#) in the Arab world across all sects, Erdogan's own suppression of protest has marked him a hypocrite, and Kurdish "autonomy" in Syria raises ambitions for Kurds in neighboring Turkey.

The Turks will understand the security imperative, but the clincher will be the economic ones. Syria needs a lot of reconstruction and Iraq has oil wealth to spend once calm returns. Furthermore, a gas pipeline initiative stretching from Iran to the Mediterranean will altogether bypass Turkey - if it doesn't play ball.

Egypt is likely to fall in line with the Security Arc for the simple reason that it now faces the same problems. Indebted as the interim military government may be to the petrodollars of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf state sponsors, Egypt will be entirely bankrupt if religious militancy takes hold, as it now threatens to do. Attacks against security forces in the Sinai surged during Egypt's popular uprising in early 2011, and have gained momentum again since last summer when the military establishment returned to power. Today, non-Bedouin militants from outside the area are flocking to the Sinai, stocked with advanced weaponry from conflicts in Libya and Sudan. During the short reign of the Muslim Brotherhood which endorsed Syrian rebels, [thousands of Egyptians](#) flocked to the fight in Syria. It is likely that a state governed or dominated by a secular military establishment will follow the Syrian example and implement heavy security solutions to break the back of extremists.

Whatever one's political inclinations, there is little doubt that inaction against Salafist militants at this juncture will lead to the disintegration of states throughout the Mideast.

The most dangerous hubs today are Syria, followed by Iraq, because of their political and geographical centrality in the region, and the likelihood of smaller or weaker neighbors being swept into the chaos.

The fight against extremism will therefore start inside the Security Arc, and will receive immediate support from the BRICS states and non-aligned nations. The West may choose to play key roles behind the scenes instead of unsettling their regional allies - at least for a while. But as confrontation escalates, countries will have to "take clear sides" in this pivotal battle, both in the

Mideast and outside. Expect opportunism to play a hand - there may be a point at which a "stalemate" may be desirable for some. Few will dare to support the extremists, however, so also anticipate some serious narrative shifts on 'good-guys' and 'bad-guys' in the Mideast.

This, now, is the real War on Terror. But this time it will be led from inside the Middle East, gain universal support and change the regional political balance of power for generations to come.

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