

Islamist Militants Aim to Redraw Map of the Middle East Governments Under Siege as ISIS Seeks to Impose Vision of Single Radical Islamist State

At an annual security conference in Israel this week, the head of the military showed pictures of two long-dead diplomats.

Mark Sykes, an Englishman, and François Georges-Picot, a Frenchman, secured their place in history by cutting a deal that drew the borders of the modern Middle East.



The point of recalling the men: It suddenly appears those century-old borders, and the Middle Eastern states they defined, are being stretched and possibly erased.

"This entire system is disintegrating like a house of cards that starts to collapse," Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz said.

The Obama administration signaled it is preparing to re-engage militarily in Iraq, a remarkable U-turn for a president who campaigned in

2008 on ending the war there and has cited the removal of U.S. troops as one of his top successes. Photo: AP

A militant Islamist group that has carved out control of a swath of Syria has moved into Iraq, conquering cities and threatening the Iraqi government the U.S. helped create and support with billions of dollars in aid and thousands of American lives.

The group—known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham—isn't a threat only to Iraq and Syria. It seeks to impose its vision of a single radical Islamist state stretching from the Mediterranean coast of Syria through modern Iraq, the region of the Islamic Caliphates established in the seventh and eighth centuries.

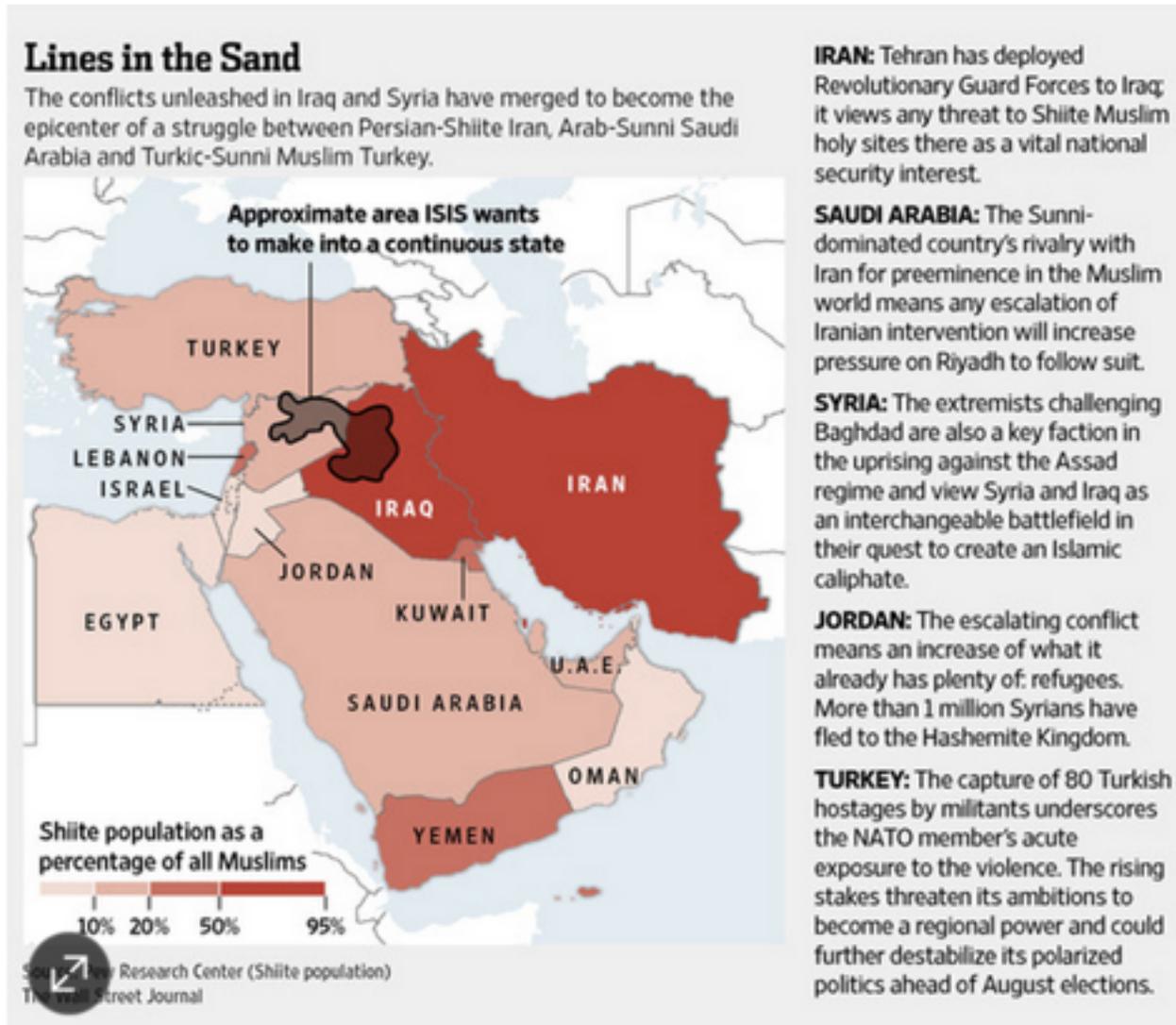
The threat of Sunni extremists eclipsing the power of its Shiite-dominated Arab ally presents Iran with the biggest security and strategic challenge it has faced since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Photo: Youtube/Brown Moses

Governments and borders are under siege elsewhere, as well. For more than a year, Shiite militias from Lebanon have moved into Syria and operated as a virtual arm of the Syrian government. Meanwhile, so many Syrian refugees have gone in the opposite direction—fleeing into Lebanon—that Lebanon now houses more school-age Syrian children than Lebanese children.

And in Iraq, the Kurdish population has carved out a homeland in the north of the country that—with the help of Turkey and against the wishes of the Iraqi government—exports its own oil, runs

its own customs and immigration operations and fields its own military, known as the Peshmerga.

The picture is difficult for the U.S., which is deeply invested in keeping the region stable, and the rapidly deteriorating situation in Iraq is setting off alarm bells inside the Obama administration.



The U.S. is weighing more direct military assistance to the government of Iraqi President Nouri al-Maliki, the White House said Thursday, and officials hinted that aid might include airstrikes on militants who have edged to within a half-hour's drive of Baghdad.

"There will be some short-term immediate things that need to be done militarily," President Barack Obama said. "Our national security team is looking at all the options." Mr. Obama also urged Iraq's Shiite-dominated government to seek political paths for moderate Shiites and Sunnis to work together against jihadists. "This should be also a wake-up call for the Iraqi government," he said.

Why are the borders of today's Middle Eastern states suddenly so porous and ineffectual?

Just months after the United States military moved out of Iraq, Islamic extremists have captured several vulnerable cities on its borders. Jerry Seib discusses with Foreign Policy Editor Bob Ourlan about the developing situation. Photo: Associated Press

The militants known as ISIS wreaking havoc in Iraq are an 'Islamist' group. The terms 'Islamism' and 'Islam' are often used interchangeably, but there are very distinct differences between them. In short, the conflicts unleashed in Iraq and Syria have merged to become the epicenter of a struggle between the region's historic ethnic and religious empires: Persian-Shiite Iran, Arab-Sunni Saudi Arabia and Turkic-Sunni Muslim Turkey. Those three, each of whom has dominated the whole of the Middle East at one time or another in past millenniums, are now involved in the battle for influence from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf.

Saudi Arabia, for example, refuses to recognize the Shiite government of Iraq, backs an array of almost exclusively Sunni Muslim rebel groups in Syria and bitterly opposes the Shiite Hezbollah.

Iran conversely, is the biggest backer of the Shiite-linked Syrian regime, has forged deep ties to the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government and assures that Hezbollah, which Iran's Revolutionary Guards nurtured from its birth in the early 1980s, remains impressively armed and trained.

The U.S. also has played a role. In the wake of 9/11, it toppled Saddam Hussein, who had no connection to the attacks, and launched an effort to remake Iraq as a first step to transform the region.

The U.S. straddles some of the divisions. It supports the Shiite government it helped create in Iraq, for example, while denouncing the Shiite-linked Syrian regime. Its toppling of an Iraqi leader and encouragement of sectarian rule has helped fan tensions along religious and ethnic lines. The U.S. further undermined indigenous authority with its long, troubled occupation of Iraq as it sought to rebuild the country.

Broader changes in the global power structure also have helped unleash change. For decades, the Middle East was locked in place by the Cold War and petro politics. The U.S. supported countries opposed to the Soviet Union and rich in oil—Persian Gulf monarchies, Jordan and Egypt starting in the mid-1970s—while the Soviets supported their friends—Syria, Iraq, Libya at times and South Yemen. The U.S. backed a lot of anti-democratic and despotic regimes, but the result was relative stability.

Now, though, the Cold War framework has been shattered, and the growth of new energy sources elsewhere has reduced the premium placed on stability.

The trouble for the U.S. and regional powers is that the conflict may have outrun their control, fueled by the rise of the most pernicious groups in chaotic conditions.

ISIS is a threat for both Turkey and Saudi Arabia, but its easy conquests over the past week—including Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city—were made possible by governments hobbled by years of insurgency and opposition aided by those two countries and like-minded Arab Gulf residents.

Iran, for its part, has encouraged Shiite Muslim militia groups so extreme and violent, and often intent on targeting Sunni Muslims, that many Sunnis are willing to endure ISIS if it provides the protection their own government won't.

The mess puts Mr. Obama in a box. A few weeks ago he laid out in a policy speech his rationale for staying out of the mire of such sectarian conflicts, since they seem far removed from concrete U.S. interests. Yet, he now seems to acknowledge the U.S. must do something.

The danger for the president is the U.S. are being drawn back into the fray, but with very few options, never mind good ones.