

DO WE REALLY WANT A UNIPOLAR MIDDLE EAST?

As we've all been reading tea leaves about whether and when Israel will attack Iran, I've come to suspect we're ignoring an equally important story. That is, to what degree is our post-Arab Spring policy in the Middle East serving Saudi Arabia's purposes of aiming to obliterate the Shia-Iranian-pole of influence and not just our typical responsiveness to Israeli demands? And to what degree is that a catastrophic mistake of a magnitude equal to our mistake in invading Iraq (and to what degree is the plan an effort to recover from our loss in Iraq)?

I hope to raise this question more fully in a series of posts, but first some caveats and hypotheses. First, the caveats. I'm obviously not an expert in this field. I speak none of the languages in question. I think current events in the Middle East are more obscure than even they normally are. And I'm not sure my hypotheses are right. For all those reasons, I readily welcome being told I'm an idiot on this front by those with more expertise.

My hypotheses? Dick Cheney invaded Iraq as a middle term strategy to sustain US hegemony as the world transitions into peak oil. The strategy failed, miserably. On top of that failure, we're faced with the crumbling of our old strategy in the wake of the Arab Spring. As a result, we're pursuing (either deliberately or through lack of reflection) a strategy of making the Sunni pole-Saudi Arabia-even more powerful. And yet we're doing this, bizarrely, at the same time we claim to be fighting a war against mostly Sunni terrorism. As such, the strategy seems as stupid as-and in many ways a repeat of-withdrawing troops from Afghanistan to fight in Iraq.

My thoughts on this have really solidified as I read two Bruce Riedel pieces—this recent column and one from last August. The recent one is so breathtakingly logically faulty as to merit mapping out Riedel's argument—that Iran and Al Qaeda are likely to ally for an attack this summer—closely (note that Riedel's argument is a response to Israeli spin in European papers about the Iranian threat).

- Al Qaeda and Hezbollah had contacts prior to 9/11 and some of the hijackers took advantage of known Iranian documentation practices of not stamping passports to co-transit Iran
- Al Qaeda terrorists we claim have cooperated fully have insisted there was no operational relationship between Iran and al Qaeda
- Al Qaeda has frequently targeted Shiites
- Al Qaeda has recently backed Syrian rebels while Iran has always been a key Bashar al-Assad backer

Therefore,

So despite their animosity, al Qaeda, Iran, and Hizbullah can probably also find new places to quietly cooperate, if only passively.

[snip]

In short, al Qaeda and Iran still hate each other, but they could find common cause to fight America and Britain. [my emphasis]

Having made a solid argument that al Qaeda and Iran won't cooperate, but then used that argument to conclude they might, he goes on to explain how they might do so.

- Iran will try to retaliate for Israeli and US pressure on it
- Al Qaeda might turn to Iran as its next safe haven

So Riedel presents an astoundingly illogical argument (Iran and Al Qaeda really haven't cooperated and they hate each other and therefore they might). He then says Iran wants to retaliate (he doesn't even mention al Qaeda in that paragraph), yet neglects to mention that even in its purported attempts to retaliate (the Scary Iran Plot and the recent magnet bombs), the plots have been characterized by incompetence rather than the professionalism of Hezbollah. And he says al Qaeda might turn to Iran as its next safe haven, even though we know it has turned to Yemen and Somalia and other locations in Africa.

But the nuttiest part of this Riedel column is the way he clearly maps Iran and Al Qaeda on separate sides of the next interim conflict, Syria, but then says that's a sign they'll cooperate.

Now consider Riedel's column from last August, when he apparently still adhered to basic rules of logic.

After months of protests and regime violence, King Abdallah of Saudi Arabia, one of the last absolute monarchs in the world, has called on Syria's embattled president, Bashar al-Assad, to stop the "killing machine" repressing his own people and accept at least some of the demands of Syrians calling for an end to Assad's decade old dictatorship.

[snip]

The Saudis sense a strategic opportunity has opened in Syria, a unique chance to deal a mortal blow to one of their enemies, the Shia terror group Hezbollah, and a serious blow to their regional adversary Iran. Since Israel's foolish invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the Syrian regime of Hafez and Bashar Assad has been Iran's key partner in creating Hezbollah, arming it to the teeth with thousands of rockets and missiles and sending it to create terror throughout the region.

[snip]

Riyadh worries that Assad will be replaced by chaos, but it has now come to the conclusion the risk is worth the price. If the Assad regime is destroyed, so too will Syrian support for Hezbollah be destroyed. If a new regime emerges that reflects the will of Syria's majority-Sunni population, it can become a base for destabilizing the Hezbollah-dominated government in Beirut. The power balance in the Levant could be tilted decisively against Hezbollah and undercut Iranian regional influence.

Back in August, Riedel very clearly laid out how the Saudis believed an overthrow of Assad would strengthen their power. But now that Al Qaeda has explicitly backed Syrian rebels, Riedel somehow sees a potential Iranian-Al Qaeda alliance in the offing.

All of which amounts to the same kind of argument Dick Cheney made to justify the Iraq War: he made unsupported claims that Iraq had ties to al Qaeda's terrorism (going so far as to have another Middle Eastern ally, Egypt, torture al Qaeda affiliate Ibn Sheikh al-Libi so as to invent such ties). All the while ignoring that if any nation-state (aside from Taliban-led Afghanistan) backed al Qaeda, it was Saudi Arabia (and Saudi Arabia remains the biggest

source of (private) financing for Sunni terrorists).

So now, for all the very good reasons to oppose Assad and want him gone, we're back on the same side as the Saudis and the terrorists, even while trying to establish the case that in spite of the evidence to the contrary al Qaeda and Iran have become one.

Thus far, it looks to be a thoroughly successful attempt not just to project certain risks on Iran, but also to distract from the much greater terrorist and proliferation risk from Saudi Arabia and its ally Pakistan.