

*RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: [RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg) for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.*

---

## **Iran Nuclear Deal: A Blessing in Disguise for ISIS?**

*By Shahzeb Ali Rathore*

### **Synopsis**

*The Iran nuclear deal pursued by the United States will be capitalised by ISIS within the aggrieved Sunnis as just another alliance between the West and the Shiites, thus lending more support for the ISIS push for a Caliphate. There will also be a rise in sectarian violence as a Sunni-Shia proxy war could be on the horizon.*

### **Commentary**

SINCE THE Iraqi war in the 2000s and civil war in Syria in the 2010s, the Sunnis have been ostracised and discriminated against within their respective states. Sunnis have been subjected to violence and treated as second-class citizens under Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq, Bashar al-Assad in Syria and by the Iran-backed Shiite militias. The treatment meted out by leaders and entities that are Shiite and backed by Iran, have consequently created sympathy for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) amongst the more extreme Sunnis. Not only did this result in mass mobilisation of extremist Sunni Muslims for the cause of ISIS, but it also contributed to negative sentiments towards the Shiites in the region.

The nuclear deal between Iran and the major powers - United States, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany - constitutes a modus vivendi of sorts between them to limit Iran's nuclear programme and lift international sanctions against Iran. While the objective of the compromise is to bring Iran back into the international fold, the deal will ironically entrench the notion of 'Sunni discrimination' within the aggrieved Sunni populace in the Middle East that would perceive the deal as an alliance between the West and Shiite Iran. This scenario provides ISIS the opportunity to exploit the concerns of Sunnis to their advantage, and strengthen support for their vaunted Islamic 'Caliphate'.

### **Adverse conditions of the Sunnis**

For instance, al-Maliki used Iraq's counter-terrorism laws to jail a number of Sunni dissenters in his country. Moreover, he had passed laws that disallowed Saddam-era officials to hold office. Any political power that Sunnis could have possessed was effectively dissolved by such actions.

Similarly, al-Assad's regime in Syria caused a systematic erosion of Sunni political power. At the same time, al-Maliki was supporting Shiite militias that were responsible for burning Sunni villages

during the Iraq civil war. Apparently, these Shiite governments along with the militias have been backed by Iran on one or more occasions. Iran gave sanctuary to al-Maliki during Saddam's era, while Iran provided important battlefield grounds to Assad during the Syrian war. Iran has also been accused of financing *Asaib Ahl al-Haq* (a Shiite militant organisation) that was active during the Iraqi insurgency and Syrian civil war. The group has not only fought Sunni militias but it has also allegedly attacked the general Sunni population.

Therefore, based on this systematic discrimination, the disillusioned Sunnis of Iraq and Syria are not only anti-Shiite, but ardently oppose the Shiite centre of gravity, i.e. Iran. The repudiation of the Sunnis propels the extreme Sunnis to support ISIS, which is intolerant of Shiites. In a situation where the alternative is to live under an oppressive and discriminatory Shiite government, the Sunnis consider ISIS a better bargain. In addition, for some extreme Iraqi Sunnis, ISIS represents the glory of the lost power they enjoyed under Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated Ba'ath party.

### **US-Iran coalition; Saudi-Iran proxy war**

The extreme Sunnis in Iraq and Syria see the US as an invader and ISIS as their liberator. The US is blamed for its tacit involvement in the removal of Sunnis from power in Iraq. Additionally, the US also banned the Ba'ath party in Iraq thereby effectively breaking the political power of the Sunnis, and giving birth to the insurgency within which ISIS was born and thrived.

The nuclear deal will be perceived by the radical Sunnis as another attempt by the West and the Shiites to further suppress their political, economic and social standing. ISIS will use their anti-Shia and anti-West rhetoric to strengthen their legitimacy for themselves amongst the Sunnis and bring in an increased number of recruits.

In light of the Iran nuclear deal, two regional trends in the Middle East will emerge. Firstly, there will be an escalation of the Saudi-Iran proxy wars. Secondly, ISIS' economic empowerment could occur, strengthening the group. With deeper pockets on both sides, it is only inevitable that sectarian violence will increase in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia and Iran, for decades, have been involved in proxy wars pitting extreme Sunnis and Shias of other states against each other. The nuclear deal promises economic prosperity to Iran with increased funds pumping into the country. This indicates a possibility that more funds will be directed towards Shiite militant groups, such as *Asaib Ahl al-Haq*. A vicious cycle of violence can erupt because of growing funding, with more violence being committed against the Sunni population. The aggrieved and extremist Sunnis in Iraq and Syria will be seen retaliating and rallying behind ISIS to prevent themselves from losing the high ground of power.

Saudi Arabia, along with other significant actors, has shown concern over the nuclear deal. Iran's rise to power represents a threat to Saudi Arabia's regional supremacy. While responding to Iran's growing success, the Saudis could increase funding to Sunni militant groups to counteract and reduce Iran's regional power. Moreover, it is even believed that ISIS pockets are filled by Saudi financiers, who might increase their funding to ISIS in light of the Iran nuclear deal.

### **Flooding of Oil Market Might Damage ISIS**

However, despite a probable increase in ISIS' funding, the group might also suffer economically because of Iranian oil entering the world market. A dent on this ISIS' primary revenue source indicates a possibility of substantive losses. With the lifting of sanctions after the Iran nuclear deal, Iran will now have access to the international oil market. Iran will tap into this opportunity by increasing oil production, and as a result, the oil market will be flooded with Iranian oil. Consequently, the increased supply of oil will lower prices potentially harming the profits earned by ISIS. Hence, ISIS' financial network could face irreparable damage, weakening its operational capabilities extensively.

Nevertheless the Iran nuclear deal will, in all probability, work for the benefit of ISIS. The foundation for their anti-Shia and anti-West rhetoric is strong. Considering how successful and articulate ISIS is in formulating its propaganda to attract more recruits, the Iran nuclear deal can also be used to further strengthen the organisation. The flooding of the oil market may not even make much of a difference;

while ISIS' sale of oil in the black market might hurt its operational capabilities, the ISIS' ideology would get reinforced.

---

*Shahzeb Ali Rathore is a research analyst with the International Centre for Political Violence & Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.*

---

**Nanyang Technological University**  
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)