

Ruling Amid Ruins: The Plot to Break Up Iraq

A new proxy war is brewing in the Middle East, and its consequences may be bigger than those in Yemen, Libya and Syria

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Any reader of these columns is familiar with the landscape – an intergalactic Star Wars struggle between three blocks of regional powers, as the US retreats in disarray.

The struggle for power is played out in one sandbox after another – first Yemen, to Libya, to Syria – with little thought for the Yemenis, Libyans or Syrians who live there.

Native populations are held in disdain, treated as agents of a higher will, to be bought, sold and betrayed at will.

Democracy, sovereignty and self-determination are meaningless concepts to be trotted out to western audiences only. It is force that matters, and power that prevails.

The same characters, forces, and destructive power are at play in each country – like a blockbuster movie with endless sequels. In each, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed, paces around his Death Star with his squadrons of hackers, mercenaries and assassins, plotting his next strike.

No one should be surprised to learn that yet another proxy war is being waged. This is proving to be bigger than Yemen, Libya and Syria. If the plans I am about to describe succeed, Bush and Blair's invasion in 2003 would pale in comparison.

The great game has moved to Iraq and a once proud and powerful state is facing great peril.

The following is taken from three senior Iraqi sources who are familiar with the intelligence acting Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi has received, the actions he took and the conversations that took place.

The plot

Nine months ago, a group of Iraqi politicians and businessmen from Anbar, Salah al-Din and Nineveh provinces were invited to the private residence of the Saudi ambassador to Jordan in Amman.

Their host was the Saudi minister for Gulf affairs, Thamer bin Sabhan al-Sabhan, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's point man for the region.

It is not known whether Mohammed al-Halbousi, the speaker of parliament with ties to both Iran [and Saudi Arabia](#), attended the secret Amman conference, but it is said that he was

informed of the details.

On the agenda was a plan to push for a Sunni autonomous region, akin to Iraqi Kurdistan.

The plan is not new. But now an idea which has long been toyed with by the US, as it battles to keep Iraq within its sphere of influence, has found a new lease of life as Saudi Arabia and Iran compete for influence and dominance.

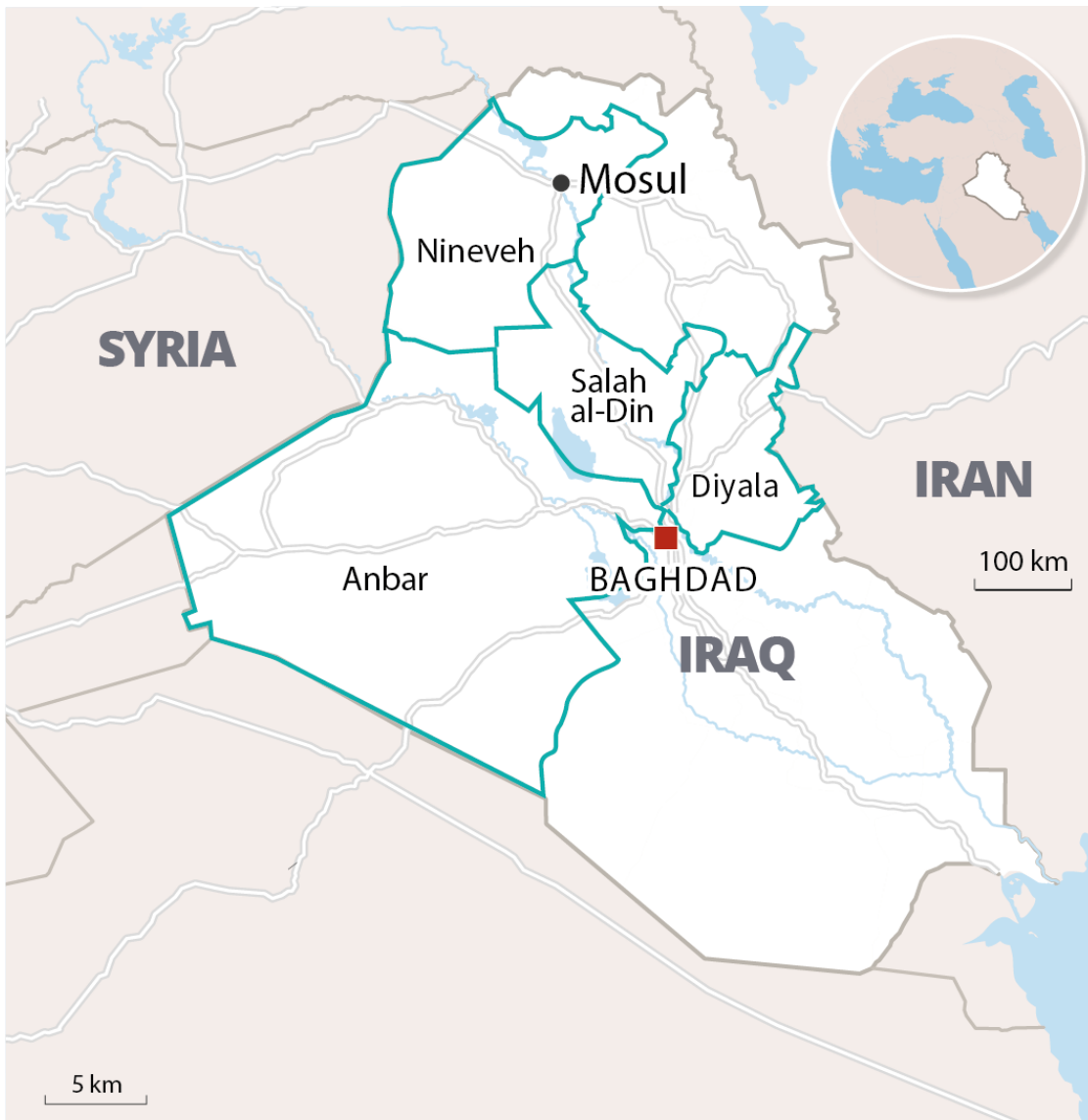
Anbar comprises 31 percent of the Iraqi state's landmass. It has significant untapped oil, gas and mineral reserves. It borders Syria.

If US troops were indeed to be forced by the next Iraqi government to quit the country, they would have to leave the oil fields of northern Syria as well because it is from Anbar that this operation is supplied. Anbar has four US military bases.

Under pressure, [Washington has stepped up efforts to partition Iraq](#) to counter Iranian influence.

The western province is largely desert, with a population of just over two million. As an autonomous region, it would need a workforce. This, the meeting was told, could come from Palestinian refugees and thus neatly fit into Donald Trump's so-called "Deal of the Century" plans to rid Israel of its Palestinian refugee problem.

Anbar is almost wholly Sunni, but Salah al-Din and Nineveh aren't. If the idea worked in Anbar, other Sunni-dominated provinces would be next.



Source: Google Maps, AFP



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The meeting ended in vigorous agreement. However, the Iraqi and Saudi participants were not the only ones listening.

Jordan's mukhabarat, its powerful secret police, an organisation big enough to be considered a parallel government, were less than pleased with what they were hearing.

They were upset with Sabhan for using the embassy in their country as a base for plotting moves in Iraq. Jordan enjoys warm relations with Baghdad, particularly after Abdul Mahdi began giving the kingdom much-needed supplies of oil.

One way or another, details of the meeting were leaked to the Iraqi premier.

Relations between Abdul Mahdi and the Saudi kingdom were good at that time. Mohammed bin Salman had opened the Kaaba in Mecca for the visiting dignitary and chose him as their intermediary with Iran.

The prime minister was privately upset, but he did not know at the time how serious this

project was and whether indeed it had the crown prince's backing. Soon afterwards, Abdul Mahdi raised the issue of the Amman meeting with the crown prince in Riyadh.

Under his premiership, sectarian tensions had declined. He had withdrawn the mainly Shia Hashd al-Shaabi paramilitary from the centres of Sunni towns and had prided himself on making sure that Sunnis were not arrested illegally by government forces.

Once again, a scheme was being hatched behind his back which would stoke sectarian tensions, and in the long run, lead to the breakup of his country.

When confronted, Mohammed bin Salman lied, as he always does. He told Abdul Mahdi the plan was "nonsense" and he would order his people to stop.

The meetings, however, continued. Some weeks later, a bigger meeting was held in Amman. This time, according to my sources, a US and Israeli representative were present.

The US representative was not overtly supportive and only stayed for part of the meeting, an hour in all, but told his Saudi counterpart: "If you can do it, it's welcome." Recent tensions have changed that equation, and now Washington is fully behind the plan.

More significantly, an envoy from the United Arab Emirates was present at the second meeting in Amman. This was a way of showing the Iraqi MPs present that the file of the Anbar project had been passed from the Saudis to their Emirati allies.

It also allowed the Saudi crown prince to claim he had nothing to do with the scheme.

The second meeting in Amman agreed to give full support to Halbousi, the speaker of parliament, in his efforts to weaken the government and to continuously raise the issue of Sunnis who disappeared at government checkpoints, which is the subject to an inquiry by [Iraq's Supreme Judiciary Council](#).

They discussed ways of "remobilising" Sunni public opinion against the Baghdad government.

The second meeting was again leaked to the government in Baghdad, which this time dispatched a top security envoy to meet the Saudis.

The behind-the-scenes confrontation happened in Paris.

"The Iraqi government only then realised the Saudis were serious and that they were not listening," an Iraqi governmental source said.

"We said to them: "How would you like it if we received political activists from your Shia Eastern Province in Baghdad and discussed with them ways of declaring themselves independent from Riyadh?"

Iraqi objections proved in vain.

A third meeting was held in Dubai. A list of people who attended was [widely publicised](#). This time Halbousi was present, along with Iraqi Sunni members of parliament, a TV mogul and party leader.

Though Halbousi has publicly denied that plans to create a Sunni region were discussed or agreed upon, others in the group itself have begun to break cover.

One of the most vocal of this group, deputy for Anbar province Faisal al-Issawi, said that “practical steps” had started towards forming an autonomous province on the lines of Iraqi Kurdistan in the north of the county.

Speaking to the [Rodao website](#), Issawi said the idea of an autonomous Sunni region was inspired by the success achieved by Kurdistan.

“Regions are a constitutional development and most countries of the world depend on them to distribute power and reduce the burden on the centre,” he said.

An official in Abdul Mahdi’s office neither confirmed nor denied the account of talks.

Halbousi, meanwhile, has publicly denied that plans for Iraqi partition have been discussed or agreed upon.

The consequences

Though this scheme has gathered steam in recent weeks, it predates the assassination of Qassem Soleimani and the missile crisis with Iran. But Tehran has reacted vigorously to it recently nonetheless.

As soon as Tehran learned that the Emiratis had taken over the file of promoting an autonomous Sunni enclave in western and northern Iraq, it made clear in the days after Soleimani’s killing that US bases on Emirati territory would be regarded as legitimate targets.

What I have reported does not downplay or minimise the strong internal forces at play in Iraq and the manoeuvrings over the choice of the next Iraqi government and prime minister.

Political forces in Iraq should never be described as pawns on its neighbours’ chess boards, as Tehran knows to its cost.

The two secret meetings in Amman and the publicly acknowledged meeting in Dubai do, however, attest to a determination by one Saudi crown prince to rule and dominate the region whatever the consequences.

As we have already seen in Yemen, the breakup of a state is not necessarily an unforeseen consequence of a military campaign gone wrong. It could be one of the objectives.

This future king will rule, whatever the cost and amid ruins, if necessary. If he gets his way in Anbar, Iraq will only be another one of his ruined states.

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