

the Sunni insurgence—is responsible for the majority of US deaths in Iraq. It is no secret that Iran is supporting Iraqi Shiite militias. Why, though, is the US making a point of linking the death of US soldiers across Iraq to Iranian assistance to Shiite militias? This has a tone similar to the false statements about the links between 9/11 and Iraq, statements which went unchallenged and eventually led to the invasion of Iraq with overwhelming American public support.

If the Sunni insurgents are cooperating with Iran, it constitutes a major turn of events, one worthy of further scrutiny. If, somehow, the Sunni insurgency is coming to view Iran as an ally against the US, yet continuing their daily attacks on the “pro-Iranian” Shiites then there is a mystery to be solved here, not just breaking news.

The US administration appears to use the familiar strategy of banking on the ignorance of the media, using it as a propaganda tool to build up the case for yet another war, this time against Iran. It is possible that some administration analyst concluded that a new conflict with Iran would serve as a convenient distraction from the situation in Iraq or even as an excuse for continued military build up. With Iraq weakened, Iran seems like an appropriate next target. However, just as with Iraq, such an intervention or attack would be great for Iranians yearning for freedom, but detrimental to US long-term national interests.

Another explanation for this bizarre linking of Iran and the insurgency is that the US administration is attempting to create a smokescreen to distract attention from the US failures in Iraq. That way, when we do withdraw, the defeat can then be blamed on Iran, and we can move on to a cold-war mode with a new chapter called “The Iran conflict.”

### 23. The Tribal factor

Saddam Hussein cultivated a culture of tribal rule in Iraq, even as the majority of Iraqis lived in modern cities and towns. This official government endorsement fostered, over many years, a tribal culture in all walks of life—with paramount importance placed on honor and tribal pride. Tribal members view each other as an extended family, and they often are. Any loss of life in the tribe demands retaliation to satisfy tribal and family honor and to insure justice, the tribal way. The same rules apply to all the tribes, small or big, Sunni or Shiite. The accompanying legal system allows for homicidal acts of revenge to be forgiven by the state, as long as the victim’s family forgives the killer.

As all tribes, at some point or another, have people in the position of having killed someone from a different tribe in some sort of retaliation, it is the norm that families forgive the killer as long as some monetary compensation is made. In general, after a killing, a retaliatory killing occurs and a settlement follows—unless the cycle takes longer because of the high status of the victims within the tribe.

This same norm is followed across the border in the Iranian Khuzestan province where there are Arab tribes applying the same tribal rules, even in cities with millions of inhabitants. This may be why some killings in Iraq seem to defy all rationale by Western standards. The act of killing the individual appears to be the purpose; the targets are of no importance as long as they belong to the right tribe.

What is new and alarming is that sectarian and religious violence are now adhering to the same tribal pattern, as if following the only system with which the Iraqis are familiar. This creates a wider scope of targets on all sides of the conflict for any would-be attackers. All they have to do is target areas with a predominance of one sect or another, and the objective of killing the enemy in retaliation is easily accomplished. Unlike tribal violence, there is no mechanism to end the cycle through settlements, as the battle field is wider, the killers are many—and so are the victims. There is no one to negotiate with or settle with, so these so-called “random killings” continue.

Appreciating this dynamic is of paramount importance for the US planners. One can look at the sectarian violence in Iraq purely from this tribal angle and try to devise solutions on that basis. This might actually work provided that the other factors, including the US military presence, are eliminated. One possible scenario is to let the tribal leaders and elders from all sects meet to negotiate an overall settlement. If opting for this process, it may be necessary to create a government fund to pay families for their loss. Compared to the billions spent on the war, the many millions needed for this process is a bargain considering all that’s at stake. This process would also provide a way for the families of those killed to start over, especially since, in most cases, the victims were the bread winners of their families. Many of the names of the victims can be obtained from the hospitals and morgues or from the families themselves. This approach represents a local solution for an out-of-control problem by providing justice the Iraqi way. The long-term solution is to revamp the civil modern justice system based on a rule of law. Meanwhile, as long as that system is not yet applicable, we might as well use what worked for the Iraqis for decades even hundreds of years.

## 24. The Syrian factor

It is clear to all that the Syrian government is sitting on shaky ground, mostly due to destabilizing efforts by the US aimed at regime change in Damascus. Unfortunately, this has led the Syrian ruling elites to circle the wagons and act in ways that have contributed to the instability in Iraq. Most Syrians are Sunni. On other side of the Syrian border lie the most violent Sunni provinces of Iraq. Syrian ruling elite are the Alawite Shiite (a minor sub-sect of Shiite) minority, though they deliberately and forcefully keep this little fact out of any public debate. The Alawite are said to constitute only 10–15% of the Syrian population, which would explain their desire to view any discussions about religious sects as taboo. The