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## Mayhem without a mastermind

**Only reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran can end the Shia-Sunni conflict in West Asia.**

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Tony Blair, former prime minister of Britain and former envoy of the Quartet on the Middle East, recently made an extraordinary statement. He said that even many years after the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003, he believed Iraq was better off today than it was in Saddam Hussein's time.

Blair seems to think that the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians in the aftermath of the intervention, the 4,000 American and many British casualties, and the reigniting of the somewhat dormant sectarian tensions between the Shias and Sunnis in West Asia was a preferable situation to the state of affairs during Saddam's time.

And what about the quarter-million Syrians who have lost their lives in the Syrian civil war that is the direct consequence of the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) group and the Shia-Sunni conflict, which in turn was the direct consequence of the invasion?

It is essential to recall these facts at present because of the turmoil that has enveloped the region and that is now threatening peace and harmony in countries beyond West Asia. All this is the direct consequence of the events of the spring of 2003. The world sympathises and stands in

solidarity with the people of France, who have been traumatised by the murderous attacks in Paris on 13 November. The Parisians are bouncing back, as did the people of Mumbai in India after 26/11. The French and Belgian security agencies are looking for the “masterminds” behind the attacks and have succeeded in eliminating at least one of them.

The phenomenon of the mastermind needs a closer look. There is always a mastermind behind a mastermind. Thus, for example, there is a mastermind behind Abdelhamid Abaaoud, said to have planned the Paris attacks. But who is the mastermind behind that mastermind? Who was the original mastermind? For an answer to this question, one has to go back to the 2003 intervention in Iraq.

The executors of the 2003 plan were the then US president George W. Bush and Blair, but they were not the masterminds. There was not one single mastermind or secret group. The people who masterminded the invasion were collectively known as “neocons”, or neoconservatives in the US, who, in turn, were motivated or goaded by the US Jewish lobby, working at the behest of Israel.

Saddam had launched missiles against Tel Aviv and other areas in Israel during the first Gulf War of 1991, creating a wave of panic among the people of Israel, forcing many of them to wear gas masks as a precaution against a possible chemical attack. Israel had every justification to want to get rid of Saddam; it managed to do so in 2003 with the help of the neocons.

The Syrian civil war similarly does not have one single mastermind responsible for it. It is the sectarian factor that has pushed the country into this carnage and bloodletting. The existence of a Shia-minority regime in Damascus, which has refused to be respectful to the leading Sunni power, has been anathema to the Sunni states in the region.

The Arab Spring of 2010-11 provided an excellent opportunity for them to try to overthrow the regime. However genuine the initial protests in Syria calling for reform were, the movement was hijacked by the Muslim Brotherhood and other, even more radical elements. Israel and Saudi Arabia became close allies, each with its own agenda, Israel wanting to get rid of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad for security reasons, and the Saudis for sectarian reasons. In Syria, it is the regional powers that have pulled in external players. A Sunni coalition is fighting a Shia coalition, each coalition being supported by powerful non-regional powers.

The US, having displeased its two closest allies in the region on the Iran nuclear deal, had to respond to calls for a more assertive stance on Al-Assad. Having made the huge mistake of making Al-Assad’s removal the sole objective, its policy only further fuelled the civil war and empowered the extremists. The entry of Russia on Al-Assad’s side seems to be helping the US to correct the balance in its approach and has concentrated minds on finding a political solution that will keep Al-Assad in power for an indeterminate period.

There is a difference in Russia’s and Iran’s attitude towards Al-Assad. Russia might not be averse to Al-Assad being replaced by someone else in due course, but Iran would not like to see Al-Assad toppled because of sectarian considerations. Iran will go much further than Russia to protect Al-Assad.

US secretary of state John Kerry is engaged in persuading his Gulf allies to agree to the interim steps that have been agreed to in Vienna. Saudi Arabia will find it hard to swallow the bitter pill of acquiescing to Al-Assad's survival for at least a few more months, which could extend to years. The objective of destroying IS, which has gained tremendous support following the Paris attacks, has had the unintended result of bringing rival coalitions together, the clear beneficiary of which is Al-Assad.

Whether or not IS can be destroyed forever is debatable; certainly its ideology will survive any military setbacks that it might suffer. The Shia-Sunni tension, which is at the root of it all, can only be contained if there is a grand reconciliation between the leaders of the respective coalitions, Iran and Saudi Arabia. As of now, this seems highly unlikely.