



Iraq: The Chickens Come Home to Roost

Guest: Scott Horton

June 27, 2014

[Scott Horton](#) is the host of Antiwar Radio on 90.7 KPFK in Los Angeles, and hosts the Scott Horton Show weekdays from noon to 3:00pm Eastern at Liberty Radio Network (lrn.fm).

WOODS: You know, Scott, a couple of weeks ago I had our mutual friend Daniel McAdams on the show because we had had some, let's say, interesting developments going on in Iraq with this ISIS organization, and the takeover of key Iraqi cities, and Daniel was saying that in his judgment, now this is two weeks ago, but in his judgment this could well be the most important, significant development in Iraq since 2003. Now, a couple of weeks have passed since then. What's your assessment of the significance of what's going on?

HORTON: Well, I'm not sure how to rank it, but, yeah, there's no overstating this, that's for sure. In context probably what he's referring to is this could be really the final end of such a thing as even a country called Iraq anymore, as the split seems to be changing now from de facto to de jure if you understand. Well, it's all George Bush's fault. This is the consequence playing out from 2003, and from the American regime change then.

WOODS: Can you tell us what this ISIS group is? Who are these people?

HORTON: Well, you might remember Colin Powell, when he was lying at the end of the war in his big U.N. speech. He cited a guy named Zarqawi as supposedly being this big link between Saddam and Osama. Well, he'd always told Osama, forget it, I don't want to work for you. And Saddam only had a death mark on him. So that was some relationship, some link, but it was close enough for Colin Powell's purposes for lying us into war. But the truth is at the time he was safe up in Kurdistan, autonomous Kurdistan, and George Bush had refused to allow the generals to attack him, and when they asked permission to attack and kill the guy before the invasion, he turned them down repeatedly because they needed their talking points. But then when it came to the war, he was the leader of a group called Ansar al-Islam that ended up at the end of 2004—so after two years almost—a year and nine months of fighting under American occupation—he finally declared his loyalty to bin Laden, and declared his group al Qaeda in Iraq, and played a large role in the Sunni-based insurgency against the American

occupation and against the Shiites that America was putting in power there—the Shiite parties and the Shiite population that America was actually cleansing Baghdad to make way for, and all the Sunnis were being pushed out of Baghdad and the Shiites were taking it over with the help of the Army and the Marine Corps. Anyway, the Army eventually killed him in 2006, and then the local, Iraqi, Sunni-based insurgency got sick and tired of these guys because they were more trouble than they were worth and marginalized them in what's called the Sunni Awakening, the Anbar awakening movement which David Petraeus gets all the credit for it, but he has nothing to do with it. Really, he just showed up and took credit for it after the fact, and that was really because the Sunnis had lost Baghdad. They had lost the civil war for Baghdad, so they called time out basically to lick their wounds. And these guys are so unpredictable, and uncontrollable, and brutal, that they decided to marginalize them. Well, then comes, as a consequence of the inflation from the Iraq war, and the terror war, and everything, and the radicalization of the entire Middle East by this violent occupation that killed a million people, the Arab Spring in 2011. Part of the Arab Spring—and there's a lot to that, but that's another show—was an uprising in Syria, and locals started rising up against the Bashar al-Assad regimen, and then so did the al Qaeda guys, and they came over from Iraq, and a lot of Syrians had participated in the Sunni insurgency in the Iraq war, and so these guys started fighting. There's a great new article about this; I just interviewed the lady today. It's in Politico magazine, believe it or not, a long-form piece, all about the history of al-Nusra and ISIS that's really good and really worth your time. Al-Nusra is basically al Qaeda and so is ISIS. The difference is that ISIS stopped taking orders from Ayman al-Zawahiri hiding out in a basement in Pakistan over there and saying to them, stay in Iraq and let Nusra have Syria. Well, they said screw you, old man. We don't have to do what you say—kind of thing, and then they went back to Iraq anyway. And that's the last couple of weeks that you're talking about here where they've sacked Mosul and all the towns all the way—almost to Baghdad now, and they are fighting over the oil refineries and all that. So they went back to Iraq anyway. That was in their plan anyway.

But there was sort of just a dispute in lines of authority, and they said, you know what, Zawahiri? Since we actually have a real Islamic state now—that George Bush gave them—that maybe now you ought to come and bow down to the Islamic state kind of thing. So internal politics inside al Qaeda is basically the only difference in the split. So now, al Qaeda in Iraq is called the Islamic State of Iraq, and now the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or Iraq and al-Sham, which typically means the Levant. Syria, Lebanon, and Israel, and Jordan—the eastern Mediterranean there, but still west and north of Mesopotamia. That region is the Levant al-Sham. And so now at the same time, the Sunnis in Iraq have had it so bad since the American war and since losing Baghdad. The whole myth of the surge working was that David Petraeus was going to meet these benchmarks, which said that the Sunnis would be incorporated, and not just a few cronies, but the Sunni population would have a stake in the government, would have jobs in the police, jobs in the military, would get on the oil dole, and none of that ever happened. America fought a war for the Shiite majority, which then told George Bush don't let the door hit you on the way out to Kuwait. Now beat it. But they never really had been able to

exercise authority over the northwestern, predominantly Sunni provinces, but they didn't really care to. They sure as hell weren't going to share power and wealth with them. And so now that has completely blown up. And as the ISIS guys have come back from Syria—I am sorry, I neglected to mention: Obama, and the Saudis, and the Qataris have been bankrolling the revolution in Syria since 2011, not directly financing the ISIS guys, but might as well be. It's not very plausible deniability because they're giving the money and the weapons to the so-called Free Syrian Army, but it all ends up in the hands of the suicide-bomber types anyway very quickly.

So Obama has really been backing al Qaeda in Syria against Assad, and at that same time, now these are the bad guys blowing back in our face, and in our allies' faces in Iraq, and the local Sunni population, the old Sunni insurgency, really is happy to have these guys back, at least for now, because they can be the shock troops in their—like we talked about in the beginning here—their declaration of independence, basically, from the Shiite south. They are no longer going to tolerate it, and of course, the army just backed away because it wasn't really their territory to hold. It's a Shiite army. It wasn't really their territory to hold. So they fell back to Baghdad, and now, if you can believe this, it's the calm in the eye of the storm before all hell breaks loose, and we figure out what does ISIS do now? Try to take Baghdad? Do they try to provoke the Shiites into invading Mosul? Do they try to attack American interests and try to bait Barack Obama into reinvading, which I think would probably be exactly what they want to do? We're just waiting to see.

WOODS: All right, look, I want to know, how is it possible even for the American regime—and you can't put anything past them in terms of incompetence, stupidity, or evil, but for heaven's sake presumably they want to be coherent. What could be the thought process by which they want to destabilize Assad in Syria, who is himself trying to fight against the very people the Americans now want to fight against in Iraq? Do they realize there's a contradiction here? Are they willing to acknowledge this? Or do they just think about one part of the world at a time?

HORTON: Well, I think all of that is at play. Part of it is ready, fire, aim, as one writer put it recently, but also, don't make the mistake now, Tom. You're a good libertarian, and you know better. Don't make the mistake of confusing the national interests of America as it could possibly be conceived with the interests of the American empire in the Middle East.

WOODS: So I want to know: what are their interests? That's what I want to know. What are they doing here?

HORTON: Yeah, so al Qaeda is the threat to you and me, that our government has made for us, of course. Iran doesn't really threaten us. But Iran threatens American hegemony in the Middle East. Barack Obama put it in plain English to Jeffrey Goldberg in *The Atlantic* two years ago. Why are we doing this in Syria? Because we're trying to take Iran down a peg by weakening Assad. And there are two reasons that they care, oh, a couple, two or three reasons they really care so much about Iran. The first reason, and I think, and foremost is because that's what

Israel wants. Because the Likud Party, the right-wing, nationalist coalition that rules Israel—they are a horrible fascist regime, and they need a foreign enemy even more than the American Empire needs a foreign enemy, and so they are constantly beating the drum about Iran, pretending Iran is a nuclear weapons threat when they have never spent one minute making nuclear bombs over there. This whole time it's been a giant lie all along, and they can't stand it. And they have so much power in Washington, D.C. it's almost unbelievable, and from their point of view Iran backs Assad, backs Hezbollah, is a nuisance on their northern border. Therefore, Tom, that's why you fight for al Qaeda in Syria. Sorry. Michael Orrin, the outgoing American ambassador, said, hey, when it comes to these bad guys versus those bad guys, I choose those bad guys because they're not backed by Iran, and by those he means al Qaeda. He means the bin Ladenites, the cousins of the butchers of New York. But because that's Israel's enemy it's supposed to be America's priority, which is absolute madness, and it's treason frankly, sorry.

The other thing is, there's also a serious grudge, and I've come to understand this, there is a serious grudge against Iran for declaring independence from America back in 1979 in the first place. They had no right to declare independence from the American Empire any more than Castro is forgiven for declaring independence from the American Empire, and it's just absolutely unacceptable. And if they can get away with it, literally, they at least can't get away with it without suffering forever for it, and so any excuse, endless sanctions, endless marginalization, etc. And then, yeah, oil, hegemony, and whatever, but none of that really works because the Iranians are selling their oil to China all day long and America can't do anything about that anyway. Oil hegemony as not as much as it is just military hegemony and dominance over every political system on the planet.

WOODS: Well, then what is it exactly that the neocons are calling for to be done? I can see what they want to have happen, but what are their specific plans, or what is it that they would like to have happen if they had one of their own in the White House? What would that person be doing? Now, obviously not returning x-number of American ground troops into there. I mean, presumably almost nobody is going to be stupid enough to advocate that. So what are they advocating, and what's wrong with it?

HORTON: Well, Bill Kristol and Frederick Kagan are saying in the *Weekly Standard*, yes, send in the ground troops.

WOODS: They are? Okay.

HORTON: I don't want to hear your excuses, and I don't want to hear your Vietnam syndrome and whatever. It has to be done, and they don't even care. They are actually kind of happy to more or less admit that, yes, okay, fine, it's all our fault. It's Bill Kristol and Robert Kagan, Fred's brother, who are most responsible for this entire project. Fred is to a great degree responsible for the surge doubling down the war in 2007, the massive failure there with all the accompanying violence, and they are saying, yes, what are you going to do? You have to send in

the Marines. Are you really going to let the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria go from the name of a group to the actual name of a country? A real place in eastern Syria and western Iraq? Now my answer is, yes, you are. Sit back and let these guys destroy themselves the same way they did in 2006. They are madmen. They cut people's hands off. They ban cigarette smoking. They dress women in complete head-to-toe black burkas and whatever everywhere they go. They engender hatred everywhere they go, these bin Ladenites. They're despicable. They may be welcomed to help push Malaki's forces aside and all that, but I don't believe they have a very long-term future holding on to power in western, northwestern Iraq or eastern Syria if America would just stay the hell out of it.

Now, if they are smart to go along with their evil, they will provoke Iran into intervening and turn this into even more of a Sunni/Shia civil war, which would attract more people, radicalize more people to their cause and all that. We don't have to turn that against us. We could stay out of it, and we should. Because look at our policies: George Bush gives all of western and northwestern Iraq, basically turns into Wild West, lawless, Jihadistan for the last 11 years for these guys, and he wasn't even trying to. Obama actually fights wars for them in Libya and in Syria, and this is the result that we're dealing with. So it's clearly time for us to stop insisting that the U.S. government exists at all and certainly stop intervening over there to protect us from the enemies that they've created for us. This is how far out of control it's gotten now.

WOODS: Scott, I know you are not a fan of Rand Paul, but I wonder if you were pleasantly surprised by the fact that he was willing in this case to say, I just don't see how this could possibly be considered Obama's fault. None of it would have happened if it hadn't been for George W. Bush. Now, he has bought into the surge worked stuff, and his comments weren't perfect, but they are more than anybody else in the GOP these days is saying.

HORTON: Yeah, well, and you notice how they didn't really fight with him about it. He was outright saying, hey, look, Obama's been more or less, he wasn't careful, but he basically accused Obama of backing ISIS in Syria, and Candy Crowley pushed back a little bit out of her ignorance, but you notice he didn't get in kinds of trouble politically for this all week, and the answer is because it's true. John McCain was over there posing on the porch with the Northern Storm Brigade, who were veterans of al Qaeda in Iraq. Obama and McCain, both the entire Republican and Democratic establishments, they're all guilty of treason up to their eyeballs, and have nothing to say to what Rand Paul said except silence. They're lucky he let them off the hook at that.

But the problem is, then he turns around and says, well, maybe we should do airstrikes. I am open to bombing them. He still can't rule it out, even though he is right that Bush created this mess, Obama made it worse not by leaving, but by the intervention that he's been doing in Syria next door. It's time to do like Ron Paul and just say, hey, call it off. Just stop it. It's my undying frustration that he won't just shoot straight. He's always got to split the difference, and instead of being everything to everyone, he's going to end up being nothing to nobody. It's a disgrace, especially, I mean, he's the best Republican, he's the best senator ever, probably. I

can't think of a better senator in all of American history, but compared to his father he's falling so far short in really hammering home the message, and I think if someone had truly tried to cross-examine him and say, what do you mean Bush's war benefitted Iran? What do you mean Obama's been backing ISIS in Syria? It seemed to me from the way he said it he hadn't really done his homework. He's got his talking points correct, but does he really know how to defend those very controversial positions? I don't think so, and I think that that is also that lack of principle, because if he had the principle, then he would be very serious about being as good as he can possibly be on this stuff so that he can fight about it and win. What if he was up against Liz Cheney? I think she would eat him for lunch, and not because she's right about anything but because she's ready to fight.

WOODS: Scott, I want you to imagine the Middle East in 2003 going forward to 2014 with no U.S. interventions at all—no Iraq war, no intervention in Libya, no intervention anywhere, none of the drones, nothing. What does that part of the world look like?

HORTON: Wow! Can you imagine? To me, look, anything can happen in a counterfactual. It's all imaginary and whatever, but for me I will go one up on your hypothetical. What if it had been a Ron Paul and Harry Browne Administration from '88 through 2000—that kind of thing? This was America's role in the world, was Harry Browne giving his Statue of Liberty speech and never shutting up about it, but meanwhile leaving everyone else alone. I think that what we would have is massive, very generally speaking, you understand the term, liberal reform across the Middle East, Shia and Sunni Islam both need a reformation bad. And the dawn of the 21st century would have been a hell of a great time to pursue spamming the crap out of them with Rothbard translated into Arabic on audiobook, right? It's all about liberty, individual liberty and property rights, and autonomy, and free choice. And there ain't nothing like freely choosing to believe in Muhammad if you want to and that kind of thing. I would love to fight a culture for the future of a libertarian world, Tom, if I didn't have my government massacring these people by the millions and claim that they are doing it in the name of free market and self-government. They're completely ruining my whole mojo here and all libertarians who are like you and I—evangelical libertarians who want to spread freedom and consider freedom to be the future of humanity. I think that, not that it would be a Rothbardian world in the Middle East, but I think that you would not—you could completely subtract 90% of the right-wing reactionary blowback from the intervention that we've had this whole time, with no al Qaeda, with no holy war, with no American support for the occupation in Palestine and in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip—the Israelis would have made peace with their friends without all of American money and firepower to back them up. They would have ended the occupation and had reasonable peace terms with their neighbors, and you know what? Iraq and Syria might still be dictatorships, but they would be sure the hell in a lot better shape than they're in right now, It's just like Ron Paul says if you really want to lead the world—and I admit it, I do; I am evangelical in my beliefs in that way—the way to do that is by example, and so I can't say that everything will be perfect. Hell, maybe there would be a giant war between Saudi and Iran. I don't know, but it wouldn't have had to been our guys that killed a million people over there, got a million

people killed over there, and disgraced, in fact, brand liberty for the next generations in that entire part of the world, where to them liberty just means licentiousness with violence, right? It means, oh yeah, the Americans' right to kill you. (sarcasm) Some liberty, right? They completely bastardized our Declaration of Independence, Tom, it's a disgrace. And if it had been Ron and Harry instead of the Georges, and Bill, and Obama all this time, or up until that time when all this started, I can only imagine it would have been so much better of a world

And it's not too late to start right now. In fact, I'll end with this because I know you need to let me go anyway. The Gallup Poll did a book, a whole book, called *Who Speaks for Islam?*, and they toured all the entire Middle East from Morocco, all the Muslim so-called world from Morocco to the Philippines, and they just interviewed the hell out of everybody on all these questions, and they don't hate us, and even after all this—this was in 2009 or something, 2010—so after the very worst of the Iraq war years all across the Muslim world they said they don't hate us, they hate our government, just like we do.