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Iraqi and Syrian Civil Wars: Back to Square One?

By Romain Quivoij

Synopsis

Adversaries of “Islamic State” (IS) use the crumbling of the “Caliphate” to move their pawns forward in Iraq and Syria, raising the spectre of simultaneous conflicts. Will military victories over IS be a tactical success but a strategic failure?

Commentary

PAST AND ongoing offensives in Mosul, Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor city mark a turning point in the campaign against IS. The combination of flashpoints at the local, national and international levels nonetheless jeopardises the likelihood of peace and stability in Iraq and Syria. In fact, “liberated” territories are fraught with the risk of IS resurgence and the looming threat of infighting.

Rather than pacifying the region, the impending collapse of the self-declared Caliphate is likely to work as a catalyst for tensions between belligerents and the communities some warring parties claim to represent. Iran, on the one hand, and Kurdish authorities in Northern Iraq and Syria, on the other, are emerging as the winning local players of civil wars. The rise of these stakeholders shifts the balance of power and increases the chances of conflagrations between various competitors in the Middle East.

Internecline Strife

Years of armed struggles have brought political and ideological fault lines within religious and ethnic groups to new levels. Syria’s Sunni and Christians populations provide a picture of contrasting allegiances that reflects this evolution.

Both sects and their offshoots include supporters and opponents of the Assad regime. Iraqi Sunni tribal leaders and fighters have also joined the predominantly Shia militias

known as the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU), despite widespread Sunni mistrust towards these armed groups.

Alliances mirror growing rifts among communities that are portrayed as monolithic blocs pitted against each other. Similar factionalism can be observed amongst Shia militias. According to researchers the PMU have gradually become an epicentre of intra-Shia dissensions in Iraq.

Volunteers of the PMU's 50 to 60 organisations fall under the distinct leaderships of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Iraqi cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Supporters of Khamenei are closely aligned with Tehran, while followers of Sistani and Sadr harbour a common suspicion towards Iran.

Divisions between the pro-Khamenei and pro-Sistani/Sadr factions could intensify over the coming months, as IS retreat to its last strongholds and Iraq's 2018 provincial and parliamentary elections provide ample opportunities for leaders of opposing camps to assert themselves.

Intergroup Violence

The apparent redrawing of demographic maps in crucial regions further impedes short and long term prospects for post-Caliphate recovery.

Numerous observers and analysts have accused Syrian and Iranian soldiers, Iran-backed militias as well as Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish forces of expelling Arab Sunnis and Turkmens from their homes. Entire communities would be prevented from returning and replaced with Shia or Kurdish families.

Instances of ethnic cleansing were reported in Damascus and Homs where the growth of regime-loyal Shia populations would broaden Bashar al-Assad and Iran's mutual base of support in the border region adjacent to Lebanon and Israel.

The same process was described in Syria's Northern city of Tal Abyad and Iraq's governorates of Nineveh, Kirkuk and Diyala. The Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Iraqi Kurdish fighters or Peshmergas would both look to expand territories under their control and influence in these locations.

This is evident in some areas of Iraq where crises between the Peshmergas and Shia militias are prone to escalation. The occupation of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk and its surroundings by Kurdish forces is the most obvious source of friction.

Hostilities with the PMU have so far been contained, but the controversial decision of the authorities in Kirkuk to raise the Kurdistan flag alongside the Iraqi one over public buildings and the militias' objective to "protect" Shia Turkmens living in the region, carry the potential for a greater Kurdish-Shia confrontation.

International Clashes

On the wider scale, Iran's increasing reach as well as progress made by Iraqi and

Syrian Kurds towards independence and autonomy reflect divergent trends that fundamentally reshape the post-IS milieu.

Iran is steadily extending its interests in Iraq and Syria, as illustrated by the efforts deployed by the Syrian army and Iran-linked groups to tighten their grip in villages and towns located along key routes between Tehran and the Mediterranean coast. This advance lowers the threshold of military intervention from countries alarmed at Tehran's ambitions, including Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The Iranian momentum does not appear to be stoppable over the short term. US president Donald Trump's policy in Syria remains mired in contradictory statements and one-shot measures, making it unlikely to provide a credible and effective counterbalance.

Initiatives taken by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq and Kurdish forces in Syria for carving out their respective state and provincial entities foster an additional dynamic of instability. Tehran is primarily concerned with the impact of the upcoming independence referendum that the KRG plans to hold, while Ankara is at war with Syrian Kurdish militias.

The shrinking of the Caliphate is expected to trigger a renewed cycle of crisis, open or latent, between states and non-state actors, where challenges posed by the Iranian expansion and the Kurdish question will be essential keys to the future of the regional security landscape.

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