Possible outcomes of rising sectarianism in Iraq

Escalation of the identity crisis

Since the formation of contemporary Arab republics, the identity of these states have been composed of 4 major components:
1. Arab Nationalism as an ideology,
2. A revolutionary theme,
3. A military leader,
4. A ruling party which monopolizes power.[5]

The exception was Lebanon which experienced a tripartite system, under which the President of the Republic must be a Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim and the President (Speaker) of the Parliament a Shiite Muslim. For many; this system was a major cause for the creation of militias who undermined the state, the outbreak of two civil wars and the tense inter-communal relations which Lebanon inherited over the years. Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority Paul Bremer set up a system of government in which the president must be a Kurd, the Prime minister a Shiite and the president (speaker) of Parliament a Sunni.

And as of 2004, the US administration implemented programs for democracy promotion and minority empowerment in the Middle

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[4] Paper presented in a conference organized by the Bahrain's Centre for Strategic International and Energy Studies, in September 5th 2012.

[5] The Democratic Constitutional Party in Tunisia since 1956, The Ba'th Party in Syria and Iraq since 1963, the National Democratic Part in Egypt since 1978 and the General People's Congress Party in Yemen since 1982.

East which aimed primarily at enhancing the status of ethnic and religious groups in Middle Eastern politics.

In 2005, a prominent advisor of the US administration argued: "If the elections are inclusive and liberal, the political scene is not, or not yet: no strong policy and ideology-based parties compete, but rather only political groups claiming to represent communities: ethnic, religious, regional ones".

This experiment however did not bring stability to Iraq, which has since suffered from a period of civil unrest and political turmoil. Further, it has posed a threat to neighboring countries, particularly Turkey, Syria and the GCC, all of whom have voiced their concerns over mounting sectarian tension and its impact on weakening the state's role in the Arab region. The political scene has become dominated by religious movements, ethnic groups and regional coalitions.

The problem lies in the fact that the Iraqi case fanned sectarian flames across the Middle East; US and Iranian policy aimed at Shiite minority empowerment in the region rather than on social and political inclusion thus creating an imbalance and growing tension between communities.[6]

Erosion of state legitimacy and rising sectarian and ethnic tension

Iran and Iraq do not only suffer from instability and economic decline; they are also exporting their problems to neighboring countries.

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[6] The Shia Revival. How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future by Vali Nasr, W. W. Norton & Company, 2007, 287 pp.

The Iranian economy is suffering a crisis that threatens the regime's security and stability. The World Bank ranked Iran 157 out of 186 states in economic growth. The report noted unemployment had risen to 38%, compared to 9.6% in the Middle East, and 7.9% worldwide. According to the Heritage Foundation, Iran ranked 161 among 169 countries in economic freedoms, such as the freedom of movement of capital and investment opportunities in the country.[7]

Despite this, the Iranian regime continues to insist on allocating the bulk of its annual budget to developing missile systems and uranium enrichment projects, as well as financing political groups and militias and its foreign-based security cells. Iran contributes $200m annually to fund Hezbollah in Lebanon in addition to some $300m paid to the party after confronting Israel in 2006. Iran also pays about $3m annually to its followers from armed militias in Iraq. Further, it finances the centers run by the Quds Brigade to train armed militia, and shipments of arms and missiles sent by Iran to its allies.[8]

In this particular policy of supporting militias and paramilitary groups, Iran and US policy coincide in a remarkable way. The US administration has repeatedly ignored requests to disband ethnic and sectarian militias, and rather recognized their role in 'maintaining' Iraq's security. For example, Iraq's Kurds have repeatedly insisted that the *peshmerga* (which is believed to compromise some 100,000 troops today) remain intact as a

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[7] Antony H. Cordesman and Abdullah Toukan, "US, Gulf and Israeli Perspectives of the Threat from Iran II", Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, January 2011.
[8] U.S Department of State, "State Sponsors of Terrorism", April 30, 2009.

fighting force as a condition of their remaining loyal to Baghdad instead of seeking an independent state.

The *Badr* Organization which is the Iranian-trained wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), played an important role in the U.S.-led crackdown on militia groups during 2003-2007. The group, which consists of around 10,000-strong militia, however, has reportedly remained armed, and today operates mainly in Shiite-controlled southern Iraq, where a number of regional governments are dominated by SCIRI representatives. Amongst its prominent members was Iraq's ex-Interior Minister Bayan Jabr.

The Mahdi Army controls much of Sadr City, a Baghdad slum of some 2.5 million Shiites. It is currently regrouping and rearming itself and some of its members were elected to seats on the Iraqi National Assembly.

Similarly, the Wolf Brigade which was formed in October 2004 as a commando unit composed of roughly 2,000 fighters, mostly Shiites from Sadr City, was frequently used in conjunction with Iraq's army and police forces, including special operation units like the 36th Commando Battalion and 40th Brigade. They are funded and trained by the Iraqi government. Nominal control of these brigades falls under the ministries of Interior and Defense. Once outlawed and regarded as terrorist organizations, these militias are now in charge of maintaining law and order. On June 8, 2005, for example, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani praised the Kurdish *peshmerga* security force and an Iran-trained Shiite militia known as the *Badr* Organization. The continued operation of these militias raises fears among experts that security responsibilities in Iraq will increasingly be enforced not by a

unified, U.S.-trained army, but by a diverse group of potentially feuding militias that could deepen the nation's sectarian divisions. In the past, the U.S. government has said it opposes the use of unsanctioned militias. But on June 8, 2005, Sean McCormack, a State Department spokesman, told reporters that the Iraqi government's growing use of militias "is an Iraqi issue that they will decide and that they will deal with". The U.S. military however fought alongside the Wolf Brigade and other commando units in counterinsurgency operations in Mosul and Samarra. Some experts credit the U.S. military with giving assistance to commando units in the form of money, training, and equipment. "Our policy [in Iraq] is to equip those who are the most effective fighters," says Thomas X. Hammes, a former Marine officer and counterinsurgency expert. "[These commando units] may be a marriage of convenience and ultimately may be absorbed into the army or disbanded". In this policy it is the state and central government that get undermined by these militias.

Future prospects for Syria

With weak government in Damascus and even weaker and more dispersed political opposition, Syria is currently torn apart by continuing fighting and rising ethnic, sectarian and social strife. Like Iraq, Syria is gradually losing its traditional identity which compromised: a military leader, a ruling Ba'th party, a Nationalist ideology, and the concept of 'muqawama' (resistance) as a justification for its controversial foreign policy and regional alliances.

US approach towards Syria seems to be similar to that which they implemented in Iraq. Earlier in February this year, a prominent advisor to the US administration argued that: "the long running rivalry between the Shiite and Sunni factions of Islam that is the dominant dynamic in the region. Syria is ground zero in the sectarian great game consuming the Middle East". He thus argued that "having Assad exit with his regime intact could stop the violence and give Syria an opportunity to reform".

In a sign of US administration implementing this concept of making use of sectarian and ethnic groups, the US defense secretary Leon Panetta argued on 30th July 2012 that the regimes Alawite elite forces and security apparatus should remain intact in a post-Assad Syria.

A more recent development is the withdrawal of almost all of the Syrian army in the north of the country along the Syrian border. The Syrian Kurds (whose total numbers are about 2.5 million or 10 per cent of the Syrian population) have achieved de facto autonomy just as the Iraqi Kurds did in 1991.

The significance of what has happened is not immediately obvious until it is recalled that Kurdish nationalism is one of the great forces in Middle East politics. The position of the Kurdish minorities in Iraq and Turkey is crucially important for their stability. In Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) enjoys autonomy from Baghdad but, in practice, the KRG is more powerful politically, militarily and financially than the Iraqi government in Baghdad.

The question that arises is: If the Syrian Kurds achieve the same status of autonomy as in Iraq, how will Turkey be able to deny

similar status to its own Kurdish minority in the south-east of the country?

In Ankara, Baghdad and elsewhere in the Middle East there is alarm that the political chessboard of the Middle East has suddenly changed in an unexpected way. "The real fear isn't that Syria will be divided," says Aliza Marcus, an expert on the Turkish Kurds writing in The National Interest magazine. "It's that the Kurds are uniting."

Beyond identities and state structure, the boundaries of existing states are also under revision. An American academic argued "We did not think it was a good idea in general to mess with the national boundaries of the area, In particular, as a subset of this general concern with shaky boundaries, successive U.S. administrations supported the continuation of Iraq as a unitary state. None of these reasons make a lot of sense anymore. Iraq is no longer a unitary state, thanks in large part to what we did to it. Other borders have been tampered with lately, Sudan and Mali being the two most recent cases in point".[9]

Impact of the events on GCC countries and the role of these states in the wider region

Challenges emerging from non-state forces pose a great threat to the GGC countries' national and regional security. These forces have an independent identity and operate in an arena separate from that of the state they include: extremist groups, ethnic and sectarian organizations and transnational political groups, whose

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[9] Adam Garfinkle, 'The Rise of Independent Kurdistan?', August 25th 2012

influence and impact have increased in an unprecedented manner.[10]

During the past two decades a number of these regional networks have emerged including: the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, the Islamic Martyrs Movement, the Revolutionary Cells Movement and the Islamic Unity Movement. They staged terrorist attacks as seen in Iraq under the Islamic Work Organization and in Saudi Arabia under the Islamic Revolution Organization, which adopted armed violence towards security forces during the Pilgrimage season in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, October 1980.[11]

Globalization and the development of social networks have enhanced these actors' effectiveness and their ability to collaborate with Western pro-democracy organizations, international social organizations, human rights organizations and foreign media.

The absence of clear policy by the GCC states to deal with these latter elements lead to their transformation from benevolent forces to tools used by foreign organized networks to undermine the security and stability of states.[12]

Perhaps the most striking phenomenon in the Arab revolutions are the attempts of these groups to acquire international legitimacy and recognition, regardless of the level of extremism and violence they exert, such as the case of similar militias in Iraq and Lebanon. At the same time, some Western parties advocate

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[10] Eman Ahmed Rajab, "new players: styles and roles of non-State actors in the Arabi region", Journal of international politics, issue 187, January 2012. Pp. 34-47.

[11] Katerina Dalacoura, "Islamist Movements as Non-state Actors and their Relevance to International Relations", in Daphne Josselin and William Wallace (ed.), Non State Actors in World Politics. (New York: Palgrave, 2001)

[12] Katerina Dalacoura, "Islamist Movements as Non-state Actors and their Relevance to International Relations", in Daphne Josselin and William Wallace (ed.), Non State Actors in World Politics. (New York: Palgrave, 2001)

recognizing a political role for these extremist groups in the Gulf regardless of their radical pursuits.

This underscores the need for Arabian Gulf States to develop a clear strategy for dealing with these forces that pose a threat to their security and stability. This can be done through the establishment of a cultural project that limits the risk of extremist ideologies and sectarian fanaticism, and that addresses youth problems under the guise of patriotism and belongingness.

It is also essential for the GCC states to work towards a common Gulf strategy by adopting a new security strategic concept that does not clash with American interests, and at the same time does not render the GCC states under US domination.

The GCC states have covered substantial ground in military and security cooperation, but further efforts are required to come up with means of reducing the threat of Iranian terrorist networks that are used to destabilize regional security, which include militias, Hezbollah, Al-Quds Brigades, espionage and intelligence networks, clerics, officials of overseas possessions and finance companies.

Conclusion

I am not a believer in conspiracy theories; Iran and the US are enemies, but it is rather difficult to deny the existence of a common ground for strategic planning. The Iranian *Maraji'* tend to undermine Arab states;

Both, clerics of *wilayat al-Faqih* and the *Shirazis* believe that: "there are no boundaries in Islam" and emphasize that modern Arab governments are illegitimate from a religious point of view.

Thus Tehran participated in creating, training, funding and supporting militant groups in neighboring Arab countries.

Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, American policy coincided with Iranian policy to back militias and paramilitary groups in Iraq. They have plans to empower ethnic and sectarian minorities in Syria, and have very active empowerment programs for similar groups in the GCC, and for the Kurds in Turkey.

With both strategies; inter-communal relations, national identities, central governments and ultimately: national boundaries in the region are at risk.

It must be emphasized that such policies endanger the security and stability of Turkey and GCC states, and a clear strategy has to be implemented by all parties affected to minimize the risk posed by these policies.