



The Many Layers of the Syria and Iraq Conflicts

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February 5, 2016

From the outset, Western officials and journalists have tended to portray the highly complex conflicts in Iraq and Syria as simplistic morality plays. In the case of Iraq, the oppressed Iraqi people were supposed to overcome ethno-religious differences once the US-led coalition deposed the tyrant Saddam Hussein, and they were to create a collegial democracy. In the case of Syria, the ongoing fight is seen as a straightforward fight between an especially brutal dictator and plucky insurgents who are assumed to be at least reasonably receptive to democratic values. The reality is vastly more complex and sobering.

The Syrian and Iraqi conflicts need to be viewed on three levels. First, they are theaters of a fierce regional struggle for power between Sunni and Shiite forces. Iran backs Baghdad's Shiite-dominated government, whereas Saudi Arabia and other Gulf powers have been consistently backing Sunni opposition groups—some of which eventually coalesced to form ISIS. Tehran is also an extremely strong supporter of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. Assad's rule is based on a coalition of religious minorities. They include his Alawite base (a Shiite offshoot), most Christians, and the Druze.

The insurgency trying to unseat Assad is overwhelmingly Sunni Arab, which reflects the majority of Syria's population. Such a division is fairly typical of the regional power struggle in the Middle East. The key actors include Iran on the side of the Shiites and Turkey and Saudi Arabia for the Sunnis. Bahrain is another theater where Iran backs a seething majority Shiite population against a repressive Sunni royal family that is kept in power largely by Saudi Arabia's military support. And in Yemen, direct military intervention by Saudi Arabia and Riyadh's smaller Sunni Gulf allies seems determined to prevent a victory by the Iranian-backed Shiite Houthis.

In addition to the regional contest for dominance, there are brutal power struggles within Iraq and Syria. The Sunni-Shiite split heavily influences that level as well, with the Sunni faction displaying ever more radical Islamist tendencies. That is most evident in ISIS's surge of strength, but even the allegedly more moderate insurgent factions in Syria are hardly moderate in the Western sense. American and European officials have been so desperate to find alternatives to Assad and ISIL that they have flirted with such factions as the al-Nusra front—the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. Former CIA Director David Petraeus, for instance, openly urged Washington to

consider working with al-Nusra. Efforts to court slightly more moderate elements have not fared well either. There have been major defections from the Western-backed Free Syrian Army, both to al-Nusra and to ISIL. And then there was the fiasco of the Obama administration's effort to recruit and train unaffiliated moderate fighters, which turned out to be a multi-million dollar flop.

There are other complexities to the internal conflicts in Iraq and Syria. For example, the Kurds have their own distinct, separatist agenda. In Iraq, they have already succeeded in establishing a Kurdish state in the north that is independent in all but formal diplomatic recognition by the international community. Iraqi Kurdistan has its own flag, its own currency, and most important, its own military, the Peshmerga. Baghdad's authority in northern Iraq is little more than a convenient political and diplomatic fiction.

Iraqi Kurds do not even pretend to give much allegiance to the Iraqi central government. When Iraqi forces reeled from ISIS's initial offensives, Peshmerga units exploited the opportunity to seize the disputed oil-rich city of Kirkuk, and the Kurdish regional government shows no signs of wanting to give it back to the central government. When Kurdish forces expelled ISIS units from Sinjar, a city near the Turkish border but outside the boundaries of Iraqi Kurdistan, the tanks and other armored vehicles flew the Kurdish flag, not the Iraqi flag.

As if this weren't enough, in late January, for the first time in the armed conflict that has raged for nearly five years, militia fighters from the Assyrian Christian community in northern Syria clashed with Kurdish troops. What made that incident especially puzzling is that both the Assyrians and the Kurds are vehement adversaries of ISIL—which is also a major player in that region of Syria. Logically, they should be allies who cooperate regarding military moves against the terrorist organization. But the Kurds seek to create a self-governing (quasi-independent) region in northern and northeastern Syria along the border with Turkey inhabited by their ethnic brethren. In other words, Syrian Kurds are trying to emulate what Iraqi Kurds have enjoyed for many years in Iraqi Kurdistan. That explains the clash between Assyrian Christians and Kurds. Both hate ISIL, but the former supports an intact Syria (presumably with Assad or someone else acceptable to the coalition in charge), the latter does not.

The divergent agendas of outside major powers, specifically the United States and Russia, add the final layer of complexity to the Iraq and Syria conflicts — especially the latter. Washington invaded Iraq to replace an unreliable former ally with a more compliant regime. The motive in Syria was a bit more convoluted. The United States had quietly worked with Assad in the years following the 9-11 terrorist attacks, including by sending terrorist suspects to Damascus through the rendition process, for interrogations that would have been illegal under American law. But US leaders became increasingly impatient with Assad because of his close ties with Iran. As Washington's determination to undermine Iran mounted, striking at Tehran's principal ally in the Middle East became an irresistible temptation.

Unfortunately, what the United States has done in both Iraq and Syria is destabilize fragile societies and create cauldrons of chaos. That has led another outside power, Russia, to become far more proactive. Vladimir Putin's government has looked on with dismay at the results of US policy in the Middle East. Not only does it seem intended to constrain Russian influence in yet another region, it is also exacerbating instability on Russia's southern flank and could be

fomenting trouble among the country's own restless Muslim minorities. That is no small matter. The northern borders of Iraq and Syria lie barely 500 miles away from Russia's southern border.

Moscow was especially displeased with the US meddling in Syria. That conflict has jeopardized Russia's long-standing relationship with a Syrian client state, and its access to the base at Latakia — Moscow's last major military installation outside the Russian Federation. Russia's military intervention in Syria has fundamentally changed the nature of that conflict. It has made it less likely that the insurgents can forcefully remove Assad from power, and has made an emphatic statement that any successor government must be acceptable both to the coalition of religious minorities currently backing Assad and to Moscow. The United States has been relegated to the status of being one player among several.

Yet there is no clear end to the conflict in either Iraq or Syria. The long-anticipated Iraqi military offensive to liberate Mosul (Iraq's second largest city) from ISIS remains on hold. Mosul is a Sunni city, and Iraqi government forces are now overwhelmingly Shiite. It is not at all clear that Mosul residents would welcome liberation by such forces. Peace talks for Syria were briefly restarted in early February, as both the United States and rebel factions abandoned their long-standing demand that Assad resign first. But they were suspended again after only a couple of days. The role of the Kurds in such talks remains unclear.

That portion of the Middle East is a chaotic mess. Both indigenous factors and outside meddling are to blame for this unhappy situation.

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