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The Iraq Crisis and Its Geopolitical Implications

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On June 10, 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (i.e. Greater Syria) – henceforth ISIS – surprised the world by advancing into several territories of central and northern Iraq. Most notably, ISIS has taken over Iraq's second biggest city, Mosul, and the also important cities of Fallujah and Tikrit (the birthplace of former Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein). ISIS has also tried to gain control of the oil-rich area of Kirkuk (which is now under the control of Iraqi Kurdish forces). Furthermore, it is said that the vitally important oil refinery in Baiji has been almost completely taken over by ISIS in an offensive against the Iraqi army.

Most importantly, ISIS has declared itself to be an Islamist "Caliphate" (i.e. Islamic state) and has unilaterally declared statehood in Syrian and Iraqi territories under its control. The group has recently renamed itself as the "Islamic State" and declared the group's leader, Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi, as the new caliph of the Islamic State and the leader of Muslims everywhere.

ISIS' offensive has left the Iraqi state in a dire situation, ridden by sectarian and ethnic conflict. The conflict has created a large number of refugees, and has threatened Iraq's capital, Baghdad. The following addresses the roots and ideological features of the conflict, in addition to the geopolitical implications of the Iraqi crisis for regional relations and U.S. foreign policy. Emphasis is placed upon analyzing the most important developments and their implications, rather than on facts, as the situation on the ground is highly fluid.

ISIS

In short, ISIS is an Islamic extremist movement with a Sunni-Arab identity, which has the goal of establishing an Islamist Caliphate in areas of Syria and Iraq initially, with the aim to expand further. The first step has been *de facto* achieved. Ideologically, the movement is anti-Western, anti-Imperialist, and anti-Semitic. The group also has a sectarian character, for it has turned against Shiite Muslims whom it considers infidels – just like the believers of any other religion. In fact, it stated that its priority is to fight infidels (such as non-Muslims and Muslims that have strayed away from Islam); Israel comes second on the list.

ISIS employs brutal violence indiscriminately, attacking both combatants and non-combatants. Its methods include bombing attacks, suicide bombings, beheadings, rapes, and crucifixions. The extent and nature of ISIS' violence has led al Qaeda to deny any connection with it.

Although the roots of ISIS can be traced to historical events and old Islamic movements, four basic contemporary processes have led to its emergence in today's form. Firstly, the merging of two smaller Islamist organizations (i.e. the Islamic State of Iraq, and al Qaeda in Iraq) was crucial. Second was the killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi by American forces in 2006. Zarqawi had founded the Iraqi branch of al Qaeda before the American invasion of 2003, and fought Iraq's Shiites prior to the invasion. His death led to his replacement by the more radical Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi, who founded ISIS. Thirdly, the death of Osama Bin Laden and the wider collapse of al Qaeda's traditional structure has provided decentralized branches with more autonomy. Fourth, the military and other support to Jihadists by the United States (U.S.), as well as Turkey and other Gulf states, in the context of Syria's civil war and beyond. In Syria, Islamist organizations have largely been playing the role of the West's proxy against the Syrian regime of Bashar al Assad.

The Syrian and Iraqi territories captured by ISIS have given rise to a tangible new reality of the establishment (*de facto*) of an Islamic state, with great territorial and political aspirations. Moreover, its victories and lootings have given ISIS significant moral, economic, and strategic advantages – both geographically and in terms of military equipment which had been left behind when the Iraqi army fled. Lastly, ISIS has benefited greatly as other Sunni groups and groups loyal to the late Saddam Hussein joined its ranks.

Geopolitical Implications

The current Iraq crisis has, first and foremost, shown that the U.S. Middle East policy has failed miserably, in line with the government of al Maliki that Americans left behind. The irony is that the U.S. has "achieved" the very thing that it supposedly went to Iraq to prevent in the context of the War on Terror. The U.S destroyed Iraq's political, social, and institutional infrastructure, eventually rendering it a puppet-state of Iran under a government that has further polarized the Iraqi society and led it into more conflict.

The same failure can be illustrated in the case of Syria, where the various (Western) international and regional powers have failed to foresee the negative implications of their support to Islamic extremist movements. Moreover, they have prolonged and enhanced the intra-religious geopolitical conflict between the Sunni (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey) and Shiite (e.g. Iran, Iraq) axes, thus leading to a vicious cycle of sectarian conflict.

A further important implication of the crisis is that Iraq has been effectively divided into three different zones: the government controlled one (Shiite-majority), the ISIS controlled one (Sunni-majority), and Iraqi Kurdistan (Kurdish-majority). It will be very difficult for the Iraqi government to regain control over the territories captured by ISIS without significant external military support and involvement. At the same time, the Kurds appear to be one of the parties that benefited most from this crisis.

Iraqi Kurdistan (Kurdish Regional Government) has seized the opportunity to extend their territories to areas that have thus far been subject to contestation between themselves and the central government of Baghdad. After a battle with ISIS, they have taken over Kirkuk, a key-area for the energy security of Kurdistan, Baghdad, and the wider region. In parallel, Kurds have started to strongly claim more autonomy, moving towards independence. Although Israel's support to Kurdish independence is not surprising, given the long history between the two parties, Turkey's relaxed position was unusual – however, it could be explained through a combination of security, economic, and ideological factors.

This development could have a serious impact on the regional balance of power, as Iraq can no longer be viewed as one actor, but rather as three. It will further give rise to new alliances, as well as new patterns of enmity and amity. Turkey and Israel are already developing good relations with Kurdistan; Iran and the Iraqi government in Baghdad are maintaining even closer ties than before. Although the crisis seems to be bringing the U.S. and Iran closer together, as ISIS is seen as a common threat, analysts have deemed their cooperation unlikely.

Considering that Turkish-Israeli relations are moving towards reconciliation, the Iraqi crisis could serve as the reason which would push the two countries to take the final step towards reconciliation and cooperation. After all, the formation of their strategic and military alliance in 1996 was largely a result of their common threat perceptions of, and insecurities about, Syria and, specifically for Turkey, Syria's fuelling of Kurdish separatism. In that sense, it would not be surprising to see the two countries exchanging ambassadors and re-starting their strategic cooperation as Western allies in the midst of the escalating conflict in Iraq. However, it should be noted that after the latest conflict between Israel and Hamas, and Turkey's harsh stance towards Israel, reconciliation prospects seem less likely.

Syria should not be forgotten as a significant part of the current regional conflict. A significant implication of the Iraqi crisis with regard to Syria is that Bashar al Assad's regime has benefited greatly for two reasons. First, it has been justified for its warnings in relation to the extremists operating in Syria, without that meaning, of course, that Assad's regime should be granted absolution for its own crimes. This means that Syria has gained a bargaining chip since it can claim that, in the case of Assad's overthrow, the regime that would replace him would probably be extremist, in the form of ISIS. Therefore, one could argue, regime change in Syria is not in the West's best interest. Second, Iran,

Syria's main regional patron, assumes a central role in the management of the crisis in Iraq and it thus legitimizes its regional role not only as Syria's ally, but also as a potential Western cooperator.

U.S. Response

Given the above-mentioned, the stakes are indeed very high for the West, its regional allies, and the U.S. in particular. As such, the U.S. might be led to undertake military operations in Iraq, though the deployment of ground forces is not the most likely scenario. American troops and advisers have been sent to Iraq, albeit not with the purpose of fighting ISIS; they are rather meant to protect American positions and facilities in Iraq, as well as to train Iraqi armed forces. The U.S. has also promised to deliver a number of F-16 jets to Iraq, although it has delayed their delivery, as the Iraqi pilots are not yet qualified to fly these aircrafts. Russia, on the other hand, has recently delivered a batch of Sukhoi fighter planes.

Iraq's Prime Minister, Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, has also asked for U.S. air support against the ISIS militants. Although the U.S. is capable of such operations, it appears reluctant to become more involved into the conflict, three years after American troops completed their withdrawal from the country.

Admittedly, even though America's "toolbox" contains crisis management options, such as direct or indirect logistical and military support to the Iraqi government through regional proxies (e.g. Israel, Turkey), or cooperation with regional actors (e.g. Iran, Kurdistan), U.S or NATO airstrikes are probably the most easily implemented scenario. However, this does not necessarily mean that it would be the most effective scenario as well. As Jeff Collins argues, airstrikes can only have limited results and can definitely not provide the solution to Iraq's problem.

Despite the fact that the U.S. bears much of the blame for Iraq's current situation, it is now evident that any solution must come from within the country itself. This means that al Maliki's government – or any Iraqi government after that – should abolish any sectarian and polarizing policies. Rather, they should aim for a more inclusive and participatory democracy; one that would be able to accommodate Iraq's pluralistic society and social structures. This is the only way for Iraq to counter ISIS and ensure its own future, stability, and prosperity.

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