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Crisis in Iraq Risks Regional Conflagration

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http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ziad-j-asali-md/crisis-in-iraq-risks-regi_b_548596... [1]

Crisis in Iraq Risks Regional Conflagration

A potential calamity is brewing with lightning speed in the Middle East, and the world is paying insufficient attention. Extremist sectarian organizations, most notably Hezbollah and the so-called "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (ISIS), are crossing borders at their own whim in an exceptionally volatile, explosive and toxic conflagration in parts of Iraq and Syria. The old regional order established by the century-old Sykes-Picot agreement-derived borders is falling as radical nonstate actors seize the initiative and governments appear powerless to stop, control or contain them.

While the conflict in Syria has negatively affected all of its neighbors, through both spillover of fighting and refugee crises, it has been more or less contained except insofar as it has spurred the smoldering sectarian conflict in Iraq. The Iraqi conflict, by contrast, will not merely spill over its borders. Combined with the conflict in Syria, this conflagration has the explosive power to potentially spark a broader regional conflict between Sunnis and Shiites that could last for decades, pitting Iran and its clients against Sunni Arab states and their allies.

The expansion of territory in Iraq under ISIS control in the past two days has been blinding and dramatic. It is now in full or partial control of large amounts of territory and hundreds of thousands of people on either side of the Syrian-Iraqi border. Most dramatically, it has seized control of Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul, as well as other major cities including Falluja and Tikrit. It is attacking and threatening to take Samarra, home to many crucial Shiite holy places. The Al Qaeda-style group clearly has its sights set on Baghdad itself.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah's sectarian intervention in the Syrian conflict is credited by most observers as the linchpin to the continuation of the Bashar al-Assad dictatorship. The Lebanese Shiite militia has played a decisive role in numerous key battles, particularly in the south, that have allowed the Syrian regime to persist in power.

The rise of nonstate extremists in the Middle East as decisive forces has been expanded and consolidated in the Syrian war. As more responsible, nationalist and non-jihadist rebel forces fought amongst themselves, failed to take hold and were woefully neglected by outside parties, Salafist-Jihadists began to increasingly dominate the opposition to the Damascus dictatorship in certain areas, particularly the north. And Hezbollah became the mainstay of the government.

The Iraqis themselves, left to their own devices, are unlikely to be able to find an immediate solution to the urgent crisis in their country. Because the conflict in Iraq is almost entirely sectarian character, regional actors will have to play crucial role. Shiite powers must pressure Shiites, and Sunni powers must pressure Sunnis to find a way to see past their sectarian differences, and manage their grievances in order to find a way of living together again.

It's inevitable that these communities will continue to draw together in the highly charged sectarian environment. But they must understand that they have to give space to each other to participate and coexist. Iraqi Shiites will continue to defeat their own purposes if they attempt to marginalize the Sunni community in a sectarian and exclusionary manner. Iraqi Sunnis cannot achieve their own goals by banding together around fanatical extremists.

The same imperative applies to the international community. Those who argued, albeit in good faith, that the United States and its allies had "no national interests" in the outcome of the conflict in Syria, or that the Syrian conflict was ultimately containable, helped pave the way for the disastrous situation developing in Iraq. It's fair to say that their analysis about Syria has been now proven incorrect by developments in Iraq. It's obvious that the combustible mix that is brewing in Iraq, if fully detonated, would combine with the raging conflict in Syria, and cause a regional explosion that would have global repercussions that are both immediate and significant.

The Middle East as a whole, and the Gulf region in particular, remains essential to the global economy due to its huge percentage of proven oil reserves. Moreover, this potentially extremely dangerous conflagration is taking shape in a region that is both particularly politically inflammable and, literally, flammable. Therefore it's very strongly in the interests of the West in general, and the United States in particular, as well as the rest of the international community, to act quickly to prevent the Iraqi crisis from spiraling further out of control. The Turkish call for an urgent NATO meeting to discuss the Iraq crisis is an important sign of international interest, but far more needs to be done than that.

If there is to be a conflict between a "Shiite crescent" led by Iran and the Sunni Arab world, it will be fought over precisely the places and issues that are driving the sudden eruption of violence in recent days in the areas conjoining Iraq and Syria. There is every reason to fear, in brief, that if such a disastrous conflict were to occur, it would begin here and now.

It is therefore also very strongly in the interests of all the regional parties, including Iran and the major Arab states, to do everything possible to help Iraq resolve its current political crisis and rebuild a viable, genuinely inclusive political system, and hence pull back from the brink. None of them can afford the confrontation that appears to be looming, and they have every incentive to do what they can to facilitate an atmosphere of reduced tensions, less extremism and more inclusivity. Those who are tempted by the prospect of war or adventurism should remember the costs and consequences of the endless conflicts between Iraq under Saddam Hussein and Iran led by the Mullahs.

Political differences need to be resolved through an inclusive process within Iraq with the active support of regional players. Neither the region nor the world can afford to underestimate how dangerous the present situation in Iraq has become, virtually overnight, and how vital it is to contain and reverse this threat.

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