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Middle East Crisis: Foreign Interference and an Orgy of Extremism

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The Middle East is one of the most turbulent regions in the world today, engulfed by a wave of conflict and violence that threatens international security. Fed by rapidly growing religious extremism in the Arab world, the wanton destruction that characterizes the recent violence adds a new dimension to the long-simmering Arab-Israeli conflict that periodically erupts in armed clashes. The popular Arab journalist Hisham Melhem writes: “The Arab world today is more violent, unstable, fragmented and driven by extremism – the extremism of the rulers and those in opposition – than at any time since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire a century ago.”

The blitzkrieg launched by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which has adopted the simpler, if more ambitious, name of Islamic State, was as sudden as it was predictable. The current surge of jihad sentiment in this part of the world is rooted in the recent past, which began when the US and its allies invaded and occupied Iraq without UN sanction. The years-long occupation is estimated to have left nearly 500,000 dead in addition to creating several million refugees and displaced persons.

The Americans committed three major mistakes in Iraq: banning the Ba’ath party, dissolving the army, and dismissing the government bureaucracy. It is also clear why they did it. There were fears that these institutions were incapable of change and, if left intact, could resurrect the old political and social order. While Saddam Hussein was undoubtedly a cruel dictator who brought sorrow to a huge number of his fellow countrymen and many others in neighboring Iran and Kuwait, these decisions destroyed the state institutions that supported what had been a secular nationalist regime. The country’s new rulers have never managed to fill the resulting power vacuum in Iraq or to placate the volatile mass of dissatisfied skilled professionals.

A no less serious mistake was the US policy of exploiting sectarian divisions. To be sure, the Shiite population in Saddam’s Iraq faced discrimination, and the need to rehabilitate them and do justice was clear. But the rehabilitation process was not based on national consensus. Instead the Americans backed Shiite religious parties – the Islamic Dawa Party, also known as the Islamic Call Party, and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq. Washington’s “Shiite project” was essentially a religious one, turning the Sunnis into a persecuted group and predictably stoking hostility between the different sects, let alone the inevitable hostility that would arise towards the indigenous Christian minority that had lived peacefully for centuries in these lands. Meanwhile, justice and rehabilitation for the Kurds has led to the emergence of Kurdish quasi-statehood. Social fragmentation has increased as a consequence, and plans for nation building and a full-fledged nation state in Iraq seem illusory. In letting the “sectarian genie” out of the bottle, those who hoped to democratize the country and create a functioning government by military force doomed it to internecine strife. It was easy to destroy the old regime, but military force cannot build anything new.

The Iraqi army under Saddam was one of the best fighting forces in the Arab East. In 2003, confronting a US-led invasion, the army command thought better of mounting what would have been a doomed resistance to a superior enemy, and saved the Iraqi capital from destruction by reaching an understanding with the invaders. This was facilitated by many people in the military and the civil service who “quietly opposed” the dictator and blamed him for the troubles that had befallen Iraq. The army, like the Iraqis at large, was tired after the bloody wars Saddam had unleashed against Iran and Kuwait.

According to Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the United States must heed the hard lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan in the future (and this is an entirely realistic proposition judging by the movement in US opinion polls). Among other things, Cordesman says

it is important never to “fall in love with a mission.” But it looks like our partners have yet to fully absorb these lessons.

The surge of fanatical jihadi groups during the occupation of Iraq was fought back by the occupying forces and the new Iraqi government with the help of local tribes. But the jihadists had merely redeployed to the north to prepare for the capture of Mosul and neighboring towns. The most radical of all Islamic terrorist groups in the region, ISIL or IS, achieved just that in its lightning offensive earlier this year. As its name suggests, the extremists want to create an Islamic state in an area that includes Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. At first Western and local politicians and experts, who had overlooked the group’s rise, estimated that it had between seven and ten thousand fighters. Today they put that number closer to 40–50 thousand. These are extremely cruel and ruthless jihadists, hardened by the fighting in Iraq and Syria and superior to the enemies if only in their willingness to die for the cause. They are receiving generous financial support from sources based mostly in the Arabian Peninsula. Quite a few IS fighters hail from other countries in the region as well as Europe, America and Eurasia. As soon as they gained control of Raqqa, Syria, they committed a series of heinous mass executions, killing anyone who didn’t share their doctrine (primarily religious and ethnic minorities) and introducing strict Sharia law. Neighboring states are dealing with a massive refugee crisis as a result.

It should not be forgotten, however, that IS units invaded Mosul with the help of tacit allies who shared the same tactical goals, including purged military officers and officials of the former Iraqi regime as well as followers of Nakshbandiya, a Sufi sect and apparent ideological opponent of the jihadists. As a result, the precursor for a cross-border Islamic state was created, occupying only parts of Iraq and Syria, for now. Hummers captured in Mosul were sent to Syria and used for a patrol mission in the IS stronghold of Raqqa. Other weapons abandoned by the Iraqi army were also sent to Syria.

But aside from barbarically torturing, maiming, beheading and shooting dissidents, IS has created a semblance of order, albeit circumscribed by their rigid ideology. They have created a large number of decent-paying jobs, reduced crime, and encouraged agriculture and trade. The local Sunnis, at least, are getting used to the new rules. There is fear but also stability.

IS controls oil production in Syria and engages in lucrative black-market oil trading. Syria’s low-sulfur oil, which can be processed at small makeshift refineries, is sold to shadowy Turkish dealers at vastly reduced prices. This is reminiscent of Baghdad’s clandestine oil dumping to circumvent the sanctions under Saddam, when buyers included many neighboring states, including countries that were far from friendly towards Iraq. Business is business, particularly in this lucrative industry. Experts estimate that IS was bringing in as much as \$2 million a day until the US began striking oil installations in northern Syria, thus depriving IS of this important source of revenue. But the jihadists still have huge cash reserves plundered from banks in Mosul.

The Islamic State’s victories have inspired Islamic extremists around the world, raising the risk of terrorism and extremism spreading outside of the region. There is no doubt that IS recruits will eventually return to their countries of origin to carry out attacks, which fact seems to have dawned even on countries that Moscow has long been warning of the international threat of terrorism.

Now regimes that ignored the scale of this threat have joined the US-led coalition against IS. But within these countries, there are still doubts about the sincerity of the coalition members. The Saudi intellectual Turki al-Hamad asks how Saudi religious leaders can oppose the Islamic State’s extrem-

ist ideology, if they disseminate a similar ideology both at home and abroad. Hamad's skepticism is echoed by former Iranian nuclear negotiator, Ambassador Seyed Hossein Moussavian, currently a research scholar at Princeton, who points out that the Arab allies of the United States have spent billions of dollars over decades to propagate this extremist ideology in the Muslim world and continue to do so even now. Like many other experts, he believes that the US and its Arab allies lack sufficient ground forces to win the war.

One of the weaknesses of the coalition's war against the Islamic State is that it is non-contact in nature. You cannot win a war solely through air strikes, which inevitably lead to civilian losses that only fan anti-American sentiments and damage the reputations of US partners. On the ground, the IS butchers are opposed only by the Syrian government forces and Kurdish militias.

Another weakness is that the coalition lacks regional inclusiveness. It makes no sense to exclude Iran, Syria and several other non-state actors who are involved in the fight anyway and, moreover, are the chief targets for the terrorists. Paradoxically, the coalition architects have demanded that Syrian opposition forces attack both IS and government forces. The US would like Turkey to send in ground forces against IS, but, as Ankara said in early October, it would only commit troops if a buffer zone was established in the Kurdish-populated Syrian border areas, backed up by a no-fly zone (which recalls the intervention in Libya). The Turkish leaders need a place to send the 1.6 million Syrian refugees living in its borders and the Kurds fleeing the IS offensive. The Turkish preoccupation with the refugee problem is understandable. But many in the West and in the region believe Turkey's true aims lie elsewhere.

First, Turkey wants the Assad regime deposed. As Deniz Arslan wrote in Today's Zaman, this is Turkey's priority, not the fight against IS. Despite Joe Biden's apology to Turkey for suggesting that it abetted the rise of the jihadists, American officials and media continued to criticize the Turkish government. The New York Times wrote on October 9 that the Turkish leader was so eager to topple Assad that he helped ISIS and other extremists by letting militants, weapons and money flow through the Turkish border. US analysts have also expressed skepticism of the buffer/no-fly zone idea. IS has no aircraft, so the purpose is clearly to keep the Syrian air force out of the area, which will soon become a huge training camp for all sorts of insurgents, including possibly covert IS supporters. Questions have been asked in Turkey as well. The co-chairman of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party, Selahattin Demirtaş, inquired: "ISIS has neither planes nor helicopters. Why is Turkey insisting on a no-fly zone? Why is it so urgent? Whose planes and helicopters are they going to keep out?"

Second, Turkey wants to bleed dry the Kurdish militia controlled by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which both Turkey and the US regard as a terrorist organization, and to neutralize the Kurdish national movement in Syria that seeks autonomy along the same lines as Kurdistan in northern Iraq. "Ankara wants to kill two birds with one stone," argues Turkish journalist Cem Sey (T24). "One bird is Assad. The other is the only force fighting ISIS – the Kurds." But is Ankara's secret goal really to weaken the Kurdish militants? It's possible. After all, President Erdogan said not so long ago: "For us, the PKK is the same as the ISIS."

But no matter how the situation in Iraq and Syria develops, there is no doubt about the sort of tactics IS will employ if it suffers reverses on the battlefield. The masked militants will disperse, hide their weapons if necessary, and blend into the civilian population. It is also clear that the IS militants will infiltrate the so-called buffer zone for antigovernment forces – which include Islamist groups that are regarded as "moderate" by Western and some regional actors – and will train in that "sanctuary."

Clearly, the US administration has been eager to make a deal with Erdogan in which Turkey sends ground forces to Syria. Indeed, IS cannot be defeated unless there is a strong land force engaging it on the battlefield, and President Obama certainly does not want another failure in the Middle East on his hands. But the White House has also been reluctant to get involved in a “big Syrian war,” fearing that Ankara’s main aim was to topple the Assad regime rather than destroy IS. This is not to say that the US has given up the idea of overthrowing Assad; in fact, it is taking meaningful steps to bolster the anti-Assad opposition. Among other things, the Pentagon plans to drill 5,000 militants of the so-called “moderate” opposition per year at its base in Saudi Arabia (Adm. Kirby said in early October that training would start within three to five months).

Meanwhile, Russia argues – not without justification – that Western countries have become safe havens and indoctrination centers for the jihadists, including those from the North Caucasus, some of whom have already spilled the blood of civilians in the US (the terror attack at the Boston marathon on April 15, 2013). Chechen jihadists from Georgia, Turkey and a number of European countries, which earlier granted them asylum as “freedom fighters,” form a sizeable (as well as the most brutally effective) group of foreign terrorists fighting in Syria. By contrast, Russia has managed to stabilize Chechnya following two wars and to reconcile with former foes. According to Dr. Guido Steinberg of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, the Chechen jihadists in Syria are a “problem for the internal security of Europe and Turkey,” because many of them come from diasporas in Georgia or Turkey, “dozens are from Austria and France, and a few are from Belgium, Scandinavia and Germany.” It is believed that IS includes between 1,000 and 2,000 Chechens.

The threat of IS has caused the overwhelming majority of regional and global actors, including Russia, to realize that they have interests in common. Particularly dangerous is the growing number of extremist organizations in the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa joining the terrorist colossus. Given the crisis in relations between Russia and the West caused by the unjust sanctions war over Ukraine, it is unlikely that we will take joint actions to counter the jihadists. But our clear common interest in bolstering the resistance to this threat could lead to operations on parallel tracks, which would require a certain level of coordination.

The Islamic State might be defeated in the end, if the international community, with the active participation of regional players, devises a comprehensive strategy for eliminating religious extremism in the broader region. But will it be possible to put the genie of bitter inter- and intra-faith hostility in the Middle East back into its bottle? There is a deadly feud not only between the Sunnis and the Shiites but also among the Sunnis themselves: Al-Qaeda and IS, the Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, etc. Isn’t it time for the Arab world to contemplate a broad reconciliation strategy, reject deadly internecine strife and policies of regime change, and join forces in the fight against jihadi extremism?

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