

The Middle East's next conflict



Francis Ghilès

The Kurds hardly need a referendum to confirm what they already know – they wish to have their own country – but Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Masoud Barzani's announcement that he intends to call a referendum on Kurdish independence in September risks reigniting civil war in Iraq.

While the referendum would only have symbolic value – the same exercise took place 12 years ago – it is deeply dangerous for two reasons. First, the Kurds are bitterly divided, particularly between Barzani and former Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, who, though incapacitated, runs neighbouring Sulaimaniya province through an alliance with different Arab groups. Second, Iran, Turkey and the government in Baghdad are experts at dividing the Kurds and playing on the fears that many Arabs from northern Iraq have of falling under Kurdish rule.

The broader context matters. The coalition that is in the process of defeating the Islamic State (ISIS) on the battlefield lacks the means to defeat the organisation's broader philosophy, which continues to attract Sunni Muslims who feel politically excluded by a Shia-dominated government in Baghdad (and the Kurds in the north).

Various neighbours, including Saudi Arabia, exploit the sectarian tensions between the Sunnis and

Shias. The fear of Sunni Arabs is compounded by the fact that the offensive against Mosul was spearheaded by Iran-backed Shia militias, notwithstanding the fact that the local population is overwhelmingly Sunni. These militias are more powerful than the Iraqi Army and have become a state within the state.

Many Sunnis want neither rule by the centre nor by Shias nor various Kurdish militias. ISIS recruits may lie low but they will make a comeback.

Included in the analysis should be the prospect of a proxy war between Iran and Israel. To forestall an Israeli attack on its nuclear programme or an attempt at regime change in Tehran, Iran has backed local proxies and striven to build a corridor that links it geographically to its Hezbollah allies in Lebanon. This "forward defence" takes the place of missiles that can effectively target Israel, which Tehran lacks.

Hezbollah offers Iran a launching pad within 80km of major Israeli cities. Turkey also feels threatened by this Iran-built corridor because it skirts its border with both Syria and Iraq.

Kurdish leaders are not alone in seeing ISIS as the result of an ideological marriage between Arab chauvinists and Islamic radicals, both equally intolerant of the ethnic and religious other. By the same token, they fail to appreciate, as many in the West do, that ISIS's anger builds off Kurdish actions in and around

the disputed cities of Kirkuk and Mosul. These regions included a rich diversity of Turkmens, Chaldeans, Assyrian Christians, Yazidis and other smaller groups.

Former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein targeted these areas for demographic engineering but reversing that process by force cannot be done without more violence.

The region also happens to be rich in oil, which is a major factor in modern politics and explains why the region was bitterly fought over after the break-up of the Ottoman Empire. The Turkish Petroleum Company, a forerunner of the Iraq Petroleum Company, was set up in 1912 because of the growing belief that the area contained substantial oil reserves. Because they needed oil to fuel the Royal Navy, the British made sure they owned, through the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, 50% of the shares in the new company.

Although oil was only found in 1927, the British ensured that their new protectorate, Iraq – and not Turkey – should have suzerainty over the province of Mosul. The security of the provinces' mountainous boarder was another factor at play.

Both countries and non-state groups – such as ISIS and the Kurds – can be drawn into the regional prism of pain as they struggle for power. Iran says it is surrounded by pro-American countries – Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Turkey and,

further afield, Israel. Saudi Arabia sees a revolutionary power, Iran, encircling it in a region – Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen – it thought it dominated. The human cost of these rivalries has been extraordinary, as has the destruction.

More bloodshed will not bring peace and prosperity to the Kurds. Their leaders should relinquish control of areas they have taken from ISIS outside the Kurdish region and negotiate with Baghdad with the help of the United Nations.

They have friends in Western capitals, including Washington, and reaching a compromise could secure their core interests, including the key question of who owns and obtains oil revenues.

By insisting on a referendum in September, the Kurds risk losing their position of strength. They know that neighbouring Iran, Turkey and the Baghdad government do not wish to see an independent Kurdistan. A resurgent ISIS feeding on deep Arab resentment over Kurdish land grabs would bring them neither stability nor peace.

After the devastation and human suffering of recent years is it too much to hope that wiser counsels will prevail? Washington might weigh in on the side of the angels but it is doubtful whether it has the means or the political will.

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No, Mr Trump, Western civilisation isn't threatened by terrorism



Rashmee Roshan Lall

If we allow them to do so, anarchists can intimidate just as much as violent extremists. Both types of disrupters were probably on the minds of those who attended or organised the G20 summit in Germany.

The tyranny of the disrupter is worth remembering as the oft-rechristened, US-launched "war on terror" drags into its 17th year. There is no sign it is being wound down. There is no attempt to redesign or rethink the grammatically (and militarily) waging of war on an abstract noun.

If anything, the current US president is indulging in ever more hair-raising claims about the danger posed by terrorism. In Warsaw, ahead of the G20 summit, Donald Trump warned that Western civilisation itself faced an existential threat.

Such words were not meant to hearten. They may have contributed to the panic evinced by the German authorities as protesters massed in Hamburg for a "Welcome to Hell" march. The Hamburg police chief warned of "massive assaults." The German Defence Ministry report-

edly expressed worry that anarchists might "disrupt the summit's procedure, occupy all access routes and logistics hubs, attack urban infrastructure and blockade the harbour."

These are the sort of warnings the world has come to associate with terrorist violence. That they are used for acts of civil disobedience indicates the extent to which dissent itself is increasingly deemed dangerous. The terrorist, as they say, is someone who has a bomb but not an air force. Anarchists may have neither but politicians still portray them as a threat disproportionate to the mathematical risk they pose.

Time then to restate the facts. The chance of a major mishap at the hands of anarchists in Hamburg was pretty low. The risk of anyone anywhere dying in a terrorist attack is also low. Worldwide, more people die every year from heart attacks than from terrorist attacks (or those by anarchists). Nearly 18 million people died from cardiovascular disease in 2015. Nearly 30,000 people died due to terrorist attacks in the same year.

More people die from a lack of clean water than from wars. Even

for Americans, who became intensely fearful of terrorism after 9/11 and spend tens of billions every year on homeland security, the chances of being killed in a terrorist attack are very low – 1-in-20 million. There is more chance – 1-in-18 million – of an American being killed by a dog. It's a whole lot more likely he or she will win the lottery, be struck by lightning, drown in a bathtub or die in a building fire.

Then there is the lethal danger posed by traffic accidents to people everywhere but especially in the MENA region and in most low-income countries. In 2013, the World Bank highlighted MENA's soaring road traffic mortality rate. At 22 deaths per 100,000 people, it was more than four times that of countries with better road safety.

All of this is a rather long-winded way of saying it's time to apply perspective and the art and science of probability to the issue of terrorism. The hysteria has gone on too long, triggered by the collective breast-beating after every successful or foiled jihadist plot on Western soil.

It's true that the number of attempted attacks rose after ISIS called on its followers to attack

Western countries militarily involved in Iraq and Syria but only a very few were successful.

The West has suffered much less from terrorism than MENA but you wouldn't know that from the catering-waiving. Estimates from 2015 stated that 3% of all deaths by terrorism occurred in Western countries since the turn of the millennium. Three-quarters of the global total of deaths due to terrorist attacks took place in five countries – Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria and Syria.

These figures are available to the American public. They're from the US State Department's 2015 "Country Reports on Terrorism," the most recently available in the annual series. And yet the erroneous impression is nurtured that Americans and Westerners face an existential threat.

If they do, it is because fear-mongering politicians such as Trump seek to dangerously subvert the West's hard-won civil rights and rule of law in the name of security.

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ISIS virtually defeated in Mosul but root problems remain



Shyam Bhatia

Iraqi soldiers fighting to liberate the last holdouts of ISIS militants in Mosul may hold the key to either the survival or further destabilisation of the war-torn country.

Assisted by US special forces, elements of the Turkish Army as well as Kurdish and Shia militias, Iraqi Army units participated in capturing the Great Mosque of al-Nuri and surrounding areas from where ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared his caliphate.

Unlike the limited international support enjoyed by the Kurds, the Shia militias have powerful financial backing from across the border with Iran. They and their backers in Tehran are inevitably a power to be reckoned with in a post-ISIS Iraq.

The capture of the historic mosque prompted Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to observe it amounted to a "declaration of defeat" from ISIS.

After ISIS took control of the city in 2014, senior Iraqi officials, such as former Deputy Prime Minister

Hussein al-Shahristani, predicted it would not be able to retain control of the city indefinitely.

Three years later, his prediction is coming true. What happens next? Stories about Iraqi government corruption and inefficiency date from before 2014. They are still part of the conversation on the street.

One of the reasons Mosul fell so easily to ISIS was the absence of full-time soldiers to defend the city. Thousands of so-called ghost soldiers registered with the Ministry of Defence existed only in name, allowing senior officers to pocket the salaries. The issue of ghost soldiers is a major one. Finance Minister Hoshiyar Zebari has been quoted as saying there was "maybe \$500 million-\$600 million in salaries being paid to soldiers who don't exist. There are so many outlets for this money to go without any accountability."

Apart from the ghost soldiers, money has been earmarked for imported defence equipment that never arrived or for infrastructure projects that were never built. The

money is believed to have ended up in the pockets of well-connected government officials.

Other aspects of corruption continue to come to light. When Al Baiji oil refinery north of Baghdad was liberated from ISIS control in 2015, Iraqi MP Mishan al-Juburi told local television that the refinery had been looted with even underground pipes and cables stolen.

Asked who was responsible, he responded: "I'd rather be a coward one thousand times than dead once." Juburi, who is a member of a parliamentary committee investigating corruption, earlier said: "Everybody is corrupt, from the top of society to the bottom. Everyone. Including me. At least I am honest about it."

Corruption has highlighted the differences between the haves and have-nots in Iraq, as has a shortage of public funds resulting from the comparatively low oil prices that underpin government spending. Last year, oil prices plunged to \$27 a barrel at a time when the government's budget was based on price

assumptions of \$45 a barrel.

Although prices subsequently recovered, there is a big gap between what is needed and what is available for public spending. None of this has been helped by funds being syphoned into private pockets.

Stories of corruption were so endemic that at one stage desperate government officials sought the assistance of the country's leading religious authority, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, to back anti-corruption measures. Sistani did speak out but stopped commenting because, his spokesman said, "Nobody listened."

Sistani's backing may once again be required as part of a multi-pronged effort for more accountability in public life. Never mind that questions remain as to the ayatollah's effectiveness. Long term, no matter Mosul's recapture, the absence of economic reforms with political and religious backing will provide an opening for the likes of ISIS to exploit.

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