

Kurdish episode shows partition is no longer a viable option in the Arab region



Mohamad Abou el-Fadel
is an Egyptian writer.

The Kurdish experiment with independence in Iraq seemed an easy scenario to bring about given favourable historical factors, the Kurds' readiness and tenacity as well as foreign support. However, once challenges began piling up, it was virtually impossible for the Kurdish autonomous region to split off from the mother country.

The reasons are simple. In addition to the profound differences among the Kurds themselves, the independence referendum was forced on Baghdad without coordination with the central government and some regional powers were opposed to the secession.

The ill-fated Kurdish experiment cast a heavy shadow on the partition project prepared for Iraq following the US invasion and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. Similar projects for Syria, Libya and Yemen are almost brain dead. If Iraqi Kurdistan couldn't do it despite advanced preparation efforts, do other partition schemes, especially those based on sectarian considerations, for other countries stand a chance?

Observers of the Syrian crisis must recall that six years ago when the people revolted against the Assad regime, everybody anticipated the country's partition into three mini-states – a Kurdish one, an Alawite one and a Sunni one. However, conditions in Syria make falling into that trap pure fantasy.

Syrian unity carries more weight than partitioning the country. In the worst scenario, the warring parties can live with the solution of a confederation granting a very large margin of independence to regions with mixed ethnicities and sects.

Libya's partition seems to be heading towards the same fate. In Libya, too many militias made it impossible for any one of them to control a sufficiently large territory to lay claim to a state. Tribal rather than regional affiliations had the upper consideration in the crisis and regional and international powers could not agree on a single vision for Libya. Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar has not been able to



Complex situation. A member of Iraqi forces walks past a road sign after the recapture of Kirkuk from Kurdish control, on October 16. (AFP)

reconstitute a national Libyan army under the banner of unity. All these factors swept aside the partition solution.

The situation in Yemen is slightly different from the rest but the result is the same. In the past, the country was divided between north and south. Arab coalition forces, however, aim to keep it together under the control of the so-called legitimate government so another partition of Yemen is out of the question.

The fact remains that the Arab region suffers from a bout of early ageing. The region has seen the birth of entities that were unable to go along with the developments that guaranteed the main bases of statehood. The modern and scientific criteria for a country's unity, namely in territory, population and government, need revisiting in many Arab countries where disunity between these components is

no longer easy to hide.

The seeds of fragmentation are present in many Arab countries. The matter requires serious attention and persistent efforts lest some ill-intentioned parties use the fragmentation to turn people's lives into a hellish reality. We have a telling example in Somalia. The independence of the theoretical three regions of that small country has never been acknowledged by any international body and yet Somalia has suffered the torments of fragmentation for two decades.

Economic and social underdevelopment might lead to partition but experiences show that comfort and development are not sufficient for guaranteeing unity. Catalonia's experience is a case in point.

Many factors interact to push back the prospect of partition in many Arab countries, with the existence of a unified military institution topping the list. In

Egypt, the complexities created by the revolution prevented the rise of a dominant element that could rival the army's influence – and so the Egyptian state did not fall. Surviving military institutions in Syria, Libya and Yemen stand in the path of partition by depriving the disunited militias control of large territories.

Another factor is the contradictory and competing agendas of foreign powers. The effects of this are clear in Syria, where they played a big role in the survival of the Assad regime; in Iraq, where they have stopped the secession of Iraqi Kurdistan in its tracks; and in Libya and Yemen as well. Foreign powers could not agree on a common definition of terrorism in the region and each backed its own horses. They meddled militarily and politically and made partition a nightmarish prospect for its proponents.

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Does Washington have a plan for the partition of Syria?



Tom Regan

is a regular contributor to The Arab Weekly and a columnist at factsandopinion.com.

Now that the fighting in Raqqa is down to clearing out a few pockets of Islamic State (ISIS) fighters the next important regional question is: What about the Kurds?

How that question will be answered primarily depends on two men with outsized egos and a disinclination to back down: US President Donald Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Relations between the United States and Turkey are at a low point and the Syrian Kurds are caught in the middle. Erdogan considers the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), extensions of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The latter is designated a terrorist organisation by Ankara and Washington.

The United States has supported the PYD and the YPG as part of the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) because they have been the only fighters capable of defeating the Islamic State (ISIS) and recapturing Raqqa. That was the number one concern for the United States.

What happens next with the Kurds?

The YPG will be reluctant to sur-

render territory captured during the Syrian conflict. That would enrage Erdogan, who doesn't want an independent Kurdish entity on Turkey's border. Many of Erdogan's supporters say the United States and Russia have a secret plan to support the creation of a Kurdish state. It would be a "second Israel," they think, which is why Erdogan's domestic constituency wants him to send troops into Syria and Iraq to deal with this threat as soon as possible.

Experts in Washington say the US response to any such move by Turkey would depend on two factors: The future of US military bases in Turkey, such as Incirlik near Adana, and Trump's mood, which can change several times in one day. Trump does not like being directly challenged on foreign policy issues. His Twitter war with North Korea's Kim Jong-un is a case in point.

While Erdogan and Trump have publicly been cordial, it's not clear how the US president would respond to a direct challenge from the Turkish leader. Would Trump be unconcerned about an important military base in Turkey?

Trump, however, is preoccupied with his domestic agenda, not least the passing of tax-reform legislation. For Erdogan, this might mean it is a propitious time to

move into Syria.

As for what the Kurds may want, we probably need only look to the recent referendum on independence by Iraqi Kurds in the north. While this infuriated the government in Baghdad and perplexed Kurdish allies abroad, it's not hard to see a similar situation arising in Syria.

Some in the world of Washington think-tanks say the United States needs to reward the Syrian Kurds for their courage in the fight against ISIS. The United States, they say, should support Syrian Kurdistan (or Rojava) as a federal region within Syria. Anything less would be considered a betrayal by the Syrian Kurds and their allies abroad. This would undoubtedly put the United States at odds with Erdogan, however.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on October 26 said the United States sees no place for Syrian President Bashar Assad in the new Syria. Tillerson met with UN Syrian envoy Staffan de Mistura, who is expected to reconvene peace talks following the SDF's success in Raqqa and gains by the Syrian regime's Russian-backed forces. Tillerson said the discussions were "fruitful" but his comments on Assad are unlikely to be received well by Russia or Iran. Turkey, however, has no love lost for Assad.

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