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Iraq is Collapsing: It's Time to Reshape the Middle East Map

by Major (Ret'd) Michael Mitchell

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POLICY UPDATE

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It's Time to Reshape the Middle East Map

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The Iraqi government is facing imminent collapse. Its inability to forge a unified government has caused it to lose control of its institutions and security apparatus, endangering the continued existence of the state.

The Iraqi military and police have failed to suppress concerted offensives from forces of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). They have also failed to control internal sectarian violence between its own Shiite and Sunni populations.

By contrast, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has demonstrated extraordinary capacity for responsible, cooperative self-government. In addition, they have exhibited enduring capacity to not only defend their own territory, but also project their umbrella of defence into zones beyond their borders, routing ISIS forces from strategically significant parts of Iraq.

The Kurdish people of northern Iraq have resolutely pursued their quest for independent statehood, and a referendum calling for this is imminent. A growing number of countries support the Kurdish quest for national sovereignty.

An unchecked collapse of Iraq could manifestly destabilize a large sector of the Middle East, a condition that insurgent extremists would be quick to exploit. However, a controlled sectarian partition of Iraq into Kurdish, Sunni, and Shiite zones could promise an end at least to the current cycle of intractable conflicts that have long beset Iraq.

INTRODUCTION

On June 29, 2014, General Michael Hayden, former director of both the National Security Agency (NSA) and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) declared that Iraq's collapse was nearing its 'endgame', and the partition of that nation's territory was already de facto in place. Five days earlier, US Secretary of State John Kerry warned, "It is a moment of decision for Iraq's leaders, and it's a moment of great urgency. Iraq faces an existential threat, and Iraq's leaders have to meet that threat with the incredible urgency that it demands".

Three key factors are contributing to the imminent failure of the Iraqi State:

1. Iraq has been unable to forge a unified government capable of maintaining essential functions of state, national security, or territorial integrity.
Ever since control of Iraq was wrested from Saddam Hussein by US-led coalition forces in 2003, the country has failed to establish any sustainable measure of functional governance. Perpetual sectarian fighting between Shiite and Sunni Muslims, compounded by incursions from ISIS, have created a security condition that is overwhelming the Iraqi government.

2. The Iraqi military is proving ineffective and at times even unwilling to defend the state.
The Iraqi national security apparatus has generally failed to take the necessary action to protect the security of its territorial boundaries, institutions, and population. As a result, the territorial cohesion of the country is in peril both from offensive attacks from ISIS, and from incessant Iraqi Sunni and Shiite militia insurgencies.



Figure 1: Map of Iraq and surrounding countries. National Geographic. Retrieved from http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/countries/iraq-guide/

3. ISIS is steadily conquering large tracts of ground in both Iraq and Syria.
Since their emergence in April 2013 as a breakaway group of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), ISIS has pursued a relentless and remarkably successful campaign to establish an Islamic State. They have thrust deep into the heart of Iraq to within striking distance of Baghdad (see Figure 2).

Generally referred to simply as the Islamic State (IS), ISIS is an assembly of radical extremists. They currently have control over a territory that is roughly the size of Belgium. It has been estimated that they receive US$1-2 million daily from pillaging towns that they occupy, ransom payments, and the proceeds from resource sales, oil in particular. It is also estimated that ISIS possesses in excess of $1 billion in financial assets. By overrunning Iraqi military installations, they have acquired a considerable variety of small arms, ammunition, and heavier armaments including armoured vehicles, and even tanks. Their level of extremism and brutality has caused even other terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda, to distance themselves from them.

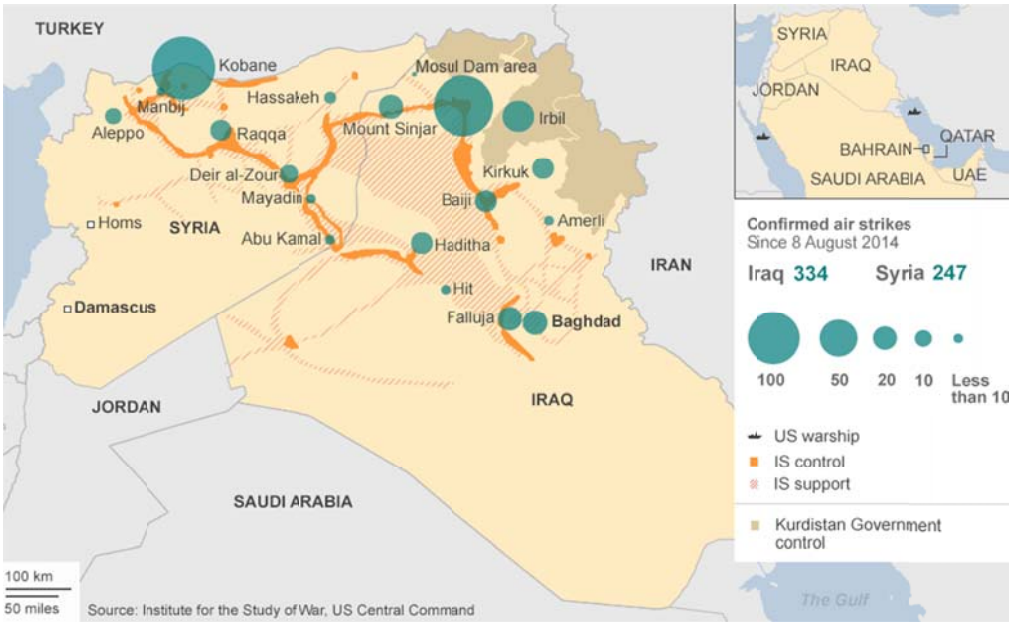


Figure 2: Map showing regions controlled by ISIS and Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria as of October 20, 2014. From BBC News - http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034

WHY IS THE IRAQI GOVERNMENT COLLAPSING?

Unlike a tangible notion of national identity such as we exhibit in Canada, there is little or no equivalent unified sense of being an Iraqi. Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish ethnic identities transcend any notion of Iraqi nationhood. This is quite understandable considering that, over the centuries, strong loyalties evolved along ethno-centric lines. By contrast, the country of Iraq is a relatively recent artificial construct thrust upon the people by international fiat in 1921 as a consequence of the Treaty of Sevres enacted the previous year.

When the Saddam Hussein regime was toppled in 2003, the US-led coalition mandated the creation of a new government that firmly enshrined identity-based, ethno-centric foundations to the new legislature and constitution. While there may have been sound reasoning behind this convention, determining how many people associated themselves with these various classifications, even as to how many were either Sunni or Shiite, was speculative at best, due to the lack of definitive census data. While quantitative data remains elusive, there appears to be almost an equal number of Shiite citizens as Sunni in Iraq. Ongoing dissatisfaction with successive election results and ill-disguised evidence of manifest corruption imparted a stigma of illegitimacy to the entire political structure. As frustration and anger percolated, violent sectarian-based insurrection ensued, further widening the chasm between ethnic groups.

The Sunnis in particular appear more intent on achieving their ambitions through insurgency rather than diplomacy at the moment. The Kurds, the majority of whom are Sunni, have clearly steered a different course. They have consistently remained at arms length from most of these squabbles, preferring instead to direct their efforts and passions toward achieving self-determination.

WHY IS THE IRAQI MILITARY SO INEFFECTUAL?

Before their departure from Iraq in 2011, the US military trained and equipped the military to very high standards. Despite this training advantage, they have suffered repeated defeats in battle at the hands of smaller, less well-equipped ISIS forces.

The Iraqi military currently consists of approximately 250,000 regular personnel, with a further 500,000 active reservists at its disposal. They possess more than 4,000 modern tanks and armoured fighting vehicles (AFV), and an assortment of 200 aircraft consisting mostly of helicopters and transport aircraft, although they have no fighter aircraft. Pitted against such a formidable force, it could logically be assumed that a few thousand ISIS rebels should be powerless. But the battle readiness or the Iraqi military was badly degraded when, prior to his recent departure from the post of prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki made several patronage appointments of generals to senior posts who supported him and his sectarian agenda. These inept and corrupt individuals were not up to the task of leading their troops in battle, and the disastrous consequences of al-Maliki's ill-conceived appointments have now become evident.

In the summer of 2014, surprisingly well-planned military strikes by ISIS routed Iraqi forces in one engagement after another. Towns, vast tracts of open land, and cities, including Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq, were easily captured. Reports of clashes where two divisions (roughly 30,000 Iraqi troops) were routed by as few as 800 ISIS soldiers were not uncommon. In their wake, fleeing Iraqi troops left huge arsenals of weapons and equipment that ISIS promptly scavenged. Military bases in both Syria and Iraq were overrun, providing further bounties of heavy armament.

THE PESHMERGA: A PIVITOL MILITARY FORCE

Peshmerga, the official name of the armed forces of the KRG, translates as "those who confront death". It consists of approximately 200,000 men and women who fight side by side. They gained the trust and admiration of American forces during the Iraq War in 2003 when they were instrumental in helping the US topple Saddam Hussein and secure the northern regions of the country.

The Peshmerga is a cohesive and daunting army. Battle-hardened, and a proven ally of the United States, it could readily provide the foundation upon which a larger, more powerfully equipped regional military force could be built. It could also be expanded to include a combat air component. It currently receives various forms of military assistance from various Western nations such as the United States, Canada, Germany, and France. Other countries, including some Gulf states are also considering some as yet undetermined forms of military support.

As Iraqi military opposition crumbled in the face of ISIS throughout early and mid-2014, powerful counter-attacks were launched against ISIS by disciplined, highly motivated formations of Peshmerga ground troops. Since June 2014, the men and women of this seasoned, yet woefully under-equipped corps recaptured key cities such as Mosul and Tikrit, rescuing thousands of desperate refugees from ISIS-dominated regions. These, and other impressive actions, have earned the Kurds considerable worldwide fame and admiration.

THE CENTRAL IMPORTANCE OF THE KURDS

Today, the Kurds are recognized as the largest national grouping without a state of their own. But that may soon change. Upon the collapse of Iraq, a newly minted Republic of Kurdistan could be all that remains of the former Iraq, but it could also provide the core for re-establishing control over the region, albeit in a completely new form. An infusion of international military aid, particularly heavy weaponry, would allow the Kurds to extend and defend their southern and western borders to absorb important urban centres and vital oil facilities, depriving ISIS of those assets and revenue sources.

Shortly after the fall of Saddam Hussein, Northern Iraq became known as Iraqi Kurdistan, an autonomous region within Iraq, which was granted its own parliament under the auspices of the KRG. The KRG is currently laying the groundwork for a national referendum on independence.

The KRG has been strengthening economic and military ties to Turkey (which is home to some 20 million Kurds), the United States, and even Israel. In June

2014 Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu voiced his support for an independent Kurdish state, indicating that it would be an opportunity for "enhanced regional cooperation". As reported in the Guardian newspaper, Netanyahu stated, "We should...support the Kurdish aspiration for independence", and described the Kurds as "a nation of fighters [who] have proved political commitment and are worthy of independence". Economic and political stability, military strength, a homogenous population, interstate entente: Many of the key elements are now in place that would support a strong and independent Republic of Kurdistan.

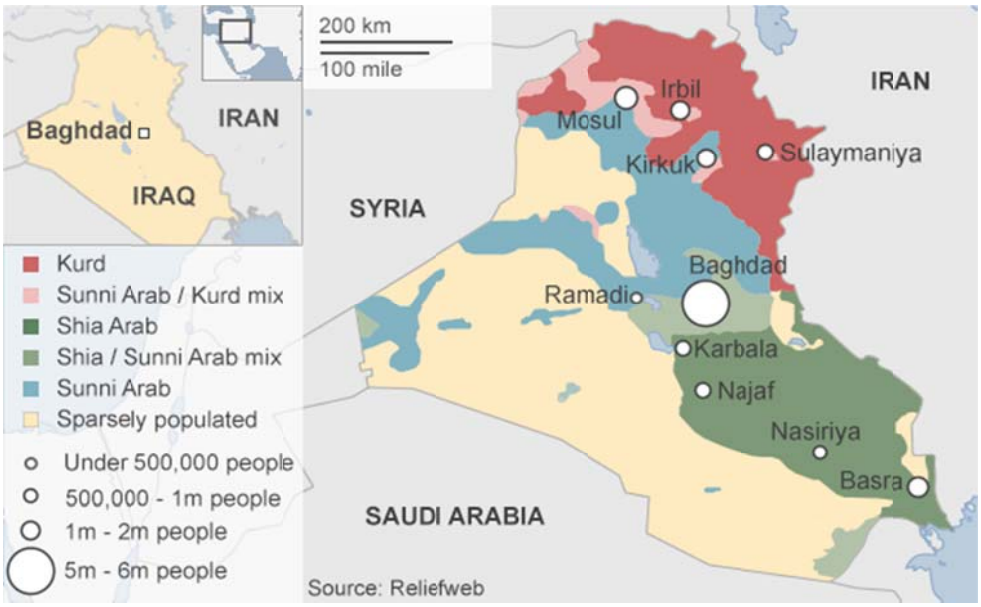


Figure 3: Map showing the distribution of ethnic populations. BBC News. Retrieved from http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034

WHAT ABOUT THE SUNNIS AND SHIITES?

Kurdistan is well along the road to statehood. The same cannot be said regarding establishing newly reshaped Sunni and Shia homelands. At least there are readily defined regions to which each group could gravitate. As shown in Figure 3, the Iraqi Shiite population is concentrated in the southeast, abutting Iran. Iran is a Shiite-dominated country so, of the three ethnic groups, Iran would likely be most welcoming of having this one on its doorstep. A new Shiite state on Iran's border would have the appeal of being a buffer against the wider Sunni populations that lie further to the west and south. Building an association between Iran and the new Shiite state would require some delicate diplomacy.

One possible outcome, or drawback, of this arrangement is that the new Shiite state may be annexed by Iran as a new province. That may be the lesser evil when compared to the possibility of genocidal eradication at the hands of ISIS. On the other hand, there is one asset that may enhance the sovereignty of the new Shiite state: Some Iraqi military formations might welcome the idea of dedicating themselves to the defense of a newly-formed Shiite homeland, leaving the internecine friction they suffered under a forcibly-combined Shiite-Sunni army behind them. This new force, perhaps with the assistance of transnational forces, could provide some surety of safe passage for Shiites during their migration from other regions.

The Iraqi Sunni population is predominantly spread out to the west and south, along the borders of Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. ISIS currently controls large swaths of the Syria-Iraq border country. The populations of neighbouring Jordan and Saudi Arabia are also predominantly Sunni. Even with the prospect of some newly rededicated Sunni military forces at their disposal, they would be hard pressed to defend such a wide, and very active battle frontage confronting ISIS, although it may be in their best interests to consider this.

Absent any western military assistance dedicated to relocation of populations and establishment of newly defined states, a Pan-Arab military coalition would be a worthwhile consideration. Although there is no such force in being at present, the rising level of threats to surrounding states may spur the creation of such a force. As reported in the Business Insider on August 20, 2014, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia announced a campaign to halt the rise in Sunni-led militancy and acts of terrorism at home and abroad. This act was inspired by a fear that the rapid advances made recently by ISIS in Iraq might threaten to spill over into Saudi Arabian territory. To reinforce efforts aimed at blunting terrorism at home and abroad, Saudi Arabia donated US$100 million to the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Force. Saudi Arabia, perhaps in solidarity with other Arab nations, might now be primed to collaborate on a regional defence pact.

POLICY OPTIONS

Option 1. Allow Iraq to simply collapse.
This scenario would be the most catastrophic. The Iraqi government would move from deadlock, to disarray, and possibly on to anarchy. Iraqi military and security forces would either dissolve or seek new alliances, on an individual or small unit basis, with either neighbouring countries, the Kurdish Peshmerga, or even ISIS. The foreseeable surge of refugees seeking safety from ISIS, sectarian militias, or opportunists would deeply strain, if not overwhelm, the capacity of

neighbouring countries to absorb them. Surrounding national borders would have to be redrawn, with inevitable interstate rancor. *(This is not a recommended option).*

Option 2. Continue to support the establishment of a unified, multi-party government.
This is the option that the US, Iran, and several others in the international community continue to openly support. But they show no willingness to provide the immediate infusion of enormous military (both air and ground) and economic resources needed to prop up what is now, and will likely continue to be, a failed state. Intractable sectarian divisions among ethnic groups and political parties are currently so polarized, that the degree of compromise and unity required to achieve the degree of government functionality desired by the US and other nations is implausible. The only reason this option could be considered viable would be as a temporary relief from continued advances by ISIS, and should continue only until such time as an orderly tri-state devolution has occurred. *(This option should be considered only as an interim measure).*

Option 3. Immediately recognize and reinforce a new Republic of Kurdistan, and support a framework leading to the establishment of independent Sunni and Shiite States.
Kurdish independence is likely imminent. The KRG has earned the respect and admiration of the wider international community. Foreign entities could confidently relocate their regional political, trade, and military bases to Kurdistan from other parts of Iraq. However, Kurdistan would face enormous and swift existential threats as ISIS tries to exploit any apparent weakness during the transition of power. On a positive note, this option may put an end to the root causes of the civil strife between the Shiite and Sunni people. *(This is the recommended option).*

CONCLUSION

North Africa and the Middle East have witnessed a crumbling of states in recent years. Libya and Tunisia have seen their governments tumble, while Iraq and Syria are facing their own existential crises. Even once powerful Egypt is struggling for political stability. Iraq is now poised to follow suit, and time is running out for the paralyzed government of Iraq. ISIS is all but knocking on Baghdad's front door, and the Kurds already heading out the back one. The Shiite and Sunni populations must quickly and proactively craft a vision for their new homeland before they lose the opportunity to do so.

The international community must prepare to actively engage in a protracted program of nation building to support the three new emerging states. It will be costly and painful, but if the Iraqi populations, in league with other well-intentioned states do not robustly commit themselves to this endeavor, ISIS and the assemblage of terrorist organizations will exploit this vacillation for their own gain.

About the Author

Major (ret'd) Michael Mitchell, OMM, CD is completing a graduate degree at Royal Roads University in Conflict Analysis and Management (Security, Ethnic, and Political studies). His interests range from analyzing current hotspots around the globe, to anticipating emerging conflicts such as those related to Arctic sovereignty. He is also the author of 'Ducimus - The Regiments of the Canadian Infantry'.

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