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Nationalism under Pressure: Islamic State, Iraq and Kurdistan

Has the Iraqi Kurds' sense of national identity been strengthened by the emergence of the so-called Islamic State? Not necessarily, says Erlend Paasche. If anything, mounting socio-economic and political tensions inside northern Iraq have been tearing at Kurdish nationalism for the last decade.

By Erlend Paasche for ISN

The so-called Islamic State (IS) continues to pose a serious threat to the Middle East and beyond. Its fighters currently have the upper hand in parts of northern Syria, and continue to threaten Baghdad's control over southern Iraq as well as the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in the north. And while the United States, United Kingdom and others continue to provide air support and military training for the likes of the Kurdish Peshmerga, calls for Washington and its partners to do more are growing. Yet, an intensification of airstrikes and the possible deployment of boots on the ground risk obscuring the bigger picture, particularly when it comes to Iraq.

Since 2003, any semblance of an Iraqi national identity has gradually given way to a society now fractured along ethnic and sectarian lines. But while nationalism has often been associated with violence and militarization in modern history, it can also provide the ideological glue that brings seemingly disparate societies together. Consequently, the apparent lack of Iraqi nationalism is both a root cause of the ongoing turmoil inside the country and the main reason why the battle with IS will not be decided by money and weapons alone.

Nothing to Defend

Indeed, the overall importance and strategic value of nationalism and national identity is by no means lost on IS. Take, for example, its ongoing attacks against Kurdish territory. The IS has been quick to label its campaign as an attempt to reclaim disputed land that is 'not a part of the Kurdistan region'. In this respect, the overall effectiveness of IS has been bolstered by the local support it receives from Iraq's marginalized Sunni Muslims. After a prolonged period of privilege, the Sunnis underwent a sudden political exclusion following the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The sense of national identity indoctrinated by Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath Party over several decades was undermined not only by strategic errors committed by the Americans, but also by a corrupt political elite whose members enriched themselves at the expense of the state. Since then, ineffectual public institutions have continuously failed to provide for most Iraqis' basic needs and further eroded the moral legitimacy of the state.

Accordingly, when Iraqi soldiers fled instead of defending Mosul earlier this summer, it was partly because they lacked a sense of nationhood and belonging to a state worth defending. As one Middle East correspondent reported on the melt-down in Iraq's second largest city, 'every derogatory story I had heard about the Iraqi army being a financial racket in which commanders bought their posts in order to grow rich on kickbacks and embezzlement turned out to be true. The ordinary soldiers may have run away in Mosul, but not as quickly as their generals.' Such stories therefore help to explain why Iraq's vast security apparatus has quite often disintegrated in the face of the Jihadists' attacks.

It should also be remembered that Iraq is consistently ranked by Transparency International (TI) as among the ten most corrupt countries in the world. The Berlin-based organization has often reported that massive embezzlement, procurement scams, money laundering, oil smuggling and widespread bureaucratic bribery have propelled the country to the bottom of international corruption rankings. High levels of corruption has also fuelled political violence and hampered effective state building and service delivery.

False Borders

If IS partly derives its legitimacy from attacking a corrupt and discredited state, then it is further bolstered by its clarion call for pan-Islamic nationalism and the restoration of the *Caliphate*. The origins of this concept can largely be traced to the "artificial" nature of the borders of the Middle East, which were mapped out following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the First World War. There is also an historical background to IS' declaration of an Islamic Caliphate, as this was the system of government that persisted in various forms from the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 until the Ottoman Empire was finally abolished in 1924. Past glory shall thus be restored by erasing what IS and its adherents believe to be false borders for the Muslim community, a goal that echoes the post-colonial nationalism of the last unifying leader of the Middle East, the Egyptian president Gamal Abd al-Nasser.

The post-World War I redrawing of the Middle East also created one of the world's largest stateless populations: the Kurds. Despite sizable Kurdish communities in Iran, Turkey and Syria, it is in Iraq where the Kurds have come closest to having their own state. Beyond the opportunities provided by the US-led occupation of Iraq, the Kurds have also benefited from the sense of national identity that the remote and sometimes inhospitable Kurdish mountains have offered. In more recent times, these mountains have served as a place of refuge for the civilian population and a base for guerrilla fighters.

Yet, even though the advance of IS during recent months continues to raise concerns over the Iraqi Kurds' ability to fight back, their sense of nationalism and national identity has never seriously been questioned by international observers. Historically speaking, the embers of Kurdish nationalism have been smouldering for nearly a century, and the Kurds have never given up on their struggle for self-government, even when the military power of Iraq's central government was far superior.

Identity under Pressure

However, a number of comparatively recent developments have brought the Iraqi Kurds' overall commitment to a distinct Kurdish nationalism into question. Since 2003, the region controlled by the KRG has experienced extraordinary economic growth and relative political stability. Oil revenues in particular have helped to bring economic development to many of the region's towns and cities. However, rising prosperity has also been accompanied by widespread perceptions that corruption is on the increase. A 2012 Gallup poll, for instance, revealed that 81% of the population viewed corruption as a major problem facing the KRG, compared with just 37% three years earlier.

The KRG's youth population is a particular source of discontent and major cause for concern. Because

a university degree no longer guarantees employment, many are struggling to establish themselves amidst dramatically rising costs of living. Many are also critical towards and alienated from their political leaders, whom they widely perceive as corrupt and self-interested. Thus, while the Iraqi Kurds' sense of shared identity and social cohesion has served them well in the past, these features are seemingly under pressure.

In addition, the new generation of Peshmergas are cosmopolitan, urban and consumer-oriented in a way that was unthinkable in the bloody decade of the 1980s. They are also far weaker militarily than their self-mythologization perhaps suggests. Indeed, two recent incidents serve to demonstrate that the Kurdish opposition might need more than just moral and material support in the long run. Towards the end of this summer, IS fighters got to within 40 kilometers of the Kurdish capital Erbil before US fighter aircraft came to the Pershmergas' aid. The attack on Erbil followed IS' well-documented and brutal assault on the Kurdish Yezidi community.

That the Iraqi Kurdish authorities blamed both events on inferior weaponry and a lack of ammunition is perhaps to be expected. It also demonstrates that there is a limit to what the Peshmergas can achieve against an organization that is currently better equipped and imbued by recent military successes, in both Iraq and Syria. That said, the West should not be blindsided into thinking that the advance of IS can be defeated by money and weapons alone. It must also take into account the relative strength of nationalism and identity among civilians and fighters from both sides.

What it will undoubtedly find is that many Sunni Muslims have become disillusioned with Iraq and what it means to be an Iraqi, and that a number of Iraqi Kurds are starting to experience the same disillusionment after more than two decades of semi-autonomy. In addition to preventing the fragmentation of the state , Iraq's new Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi now faces the uphill task of regaining both communities' trust by cleaning up systemic corruption and rehabilitating this most dysfunctional of Middle Eastern states. The long term solution is to rebuild a state that both Iraqis and Kurds can be proud of, and that IS cannot easily dismantle.

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