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Re-configuring the Middle East: IS and Changing Demographics

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

The Middle East's multiple conflicts, with Islamic State (IS) in the forefront, are altering the contours of the Middle East in more ways than one. After effectively redrawing the map of Iraq and Syria with the creation of an entity of its own, IS' impact in Kurdistan is likely to have far-reaching consequences for the region's demographics.

Commentary

THE SYRIAN civil war and Iraqi sectarian conflicts involving Islamic State (IS) have had far-reaching consequences for the demographics across the region. Once a relatively ethnically homogeneous autonomous region, Iraqi Kurdistan has seen its demography change radically as large numbers of Arab refugees pour into what was once an independent Kurdish state-in-waiting. The influx of refugees fleeing areas of Iraq controlled by IS and fighting across the country, has pitted the Iraqi military and Shia militias against the jihadists.

As a result, it is in Kurdistan where the impact of IS on borders and demographics is likely to have the most immediate and far-reaching consequences. That is all the more true given that neither Syria nor Iraq are likely to remain the nation states that they were since achieving independence.

Consequences for Kurdish independence

That has consequences for Kurdish aspirations for independence that peaked in the immediate wake of last year's sweep of northern Iraq in which IS captured Mosul, Iraq's second largest city. Initially, Massoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), responded to the IS blitzkrieg by seizing control of the disputed oil-rich city of Kirkuk and speeding up his timetable for a referendum in which the Kurds would vote on declaring independence.

However, with non-Kurdish refugees who are likely to stay for the foreseeable future, if not sprout roots, now accounting for almost a third of Iraqi Kurdistan's population of 5.2 million, prospects for independence have been significantly complicated. The stream of refugees is imposing a mixed complexion on what was once a region with an almost exclusively Kurdish identity. This unintended fallout of the refugee stream ironically fits IS' anti-nationalist vision of a pan-Islamic empire (caliphate).

The continuous military threat posed by IS has also forced Barzani to temper his aspirations. Ironically the reverse is happening in north-western Syria, where Arab Sunnis accuse Syrian Kurds, who have recently scored significant victories against IS, of cleansing areas they control in preparation of a future Syrian Kurdish state.

Multiple sensitivities

The refugee influx involves multiple sensitivities. Like in Jordan and Lebanon where refugees from Syria and Iraq have already changed demographic balances and are putting severe strains on the countries' service infrastructures, Arabs are competing on Kurdistan's job market at often far lower wages than the local Kurdish population had become accustomed to. Similarly, rents and real estate prices have skyrocketed limiting access to local Kurds who no longer can afford the hikes.

Potential social tensions that have already become visible in Lebanon and Syria could take on an extra dimension in Iraq where Kurds and Arabs have long co-existed uneasily. Kurds have not forgotten that Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein employed chemical weapons in his bid to subdue Kurds who were seeking autonomy. Immediately after Saddam's fall in 2003, Kurds forced the departure of Arabs who had settled in Kurdistan with Saddam's encouragement.

Signs of bubbling tension are becoming visible among a Kurdish population sympathetic to those fleeing discrimination, repression and violence because of their own history of suppression. Kurds are beginning to voice resentment that they are having to fight IS on the frontline to protect the Arabs seeking refuge in their midst.

The threat of social tensions is enhanced by IS' interest in stoking problems between Kurds and Arabs. A Kurdish student admitted responsibility in April for a car bomb that exploded near the US consulate in the KRG capital of Erbil.

Separatism on the rise

Analysts have praised Jordan and Lebanon for maintaining calm despite mounting tensions between Syrian refugees, who account for up to 25 percent of the population, and the local population despite regular flareups between them. Tensions are visible in Turkey too but with a population of 75 million, Turkey has less demographic and identity problems in absorbing the refugees.

The rise of IS has moreover not only created a puritan Islamist entity in the heart of the Middle East that is irredentist and expansionary in nature, it has also fuelled long-standing Kurdish nationalist aspirations and sparked separatist trends among many other groups.

Iraqi Sunnis are divided with scores fleeing to Kurdistan while others fearful of rising anti-Sunni Shia nationalism see IS as the lesser of two evils. Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's Alawite minority may see a retreat to its heartland on the Syrian coast as the only way to escape the wrath of his opponents should he be unable to hold on to the capital Damascus. Separatist tendencies are also emerging in Iraq's relatively safe and oil-rich Shia south that is the economic engine for the government in Baghdad.

Across the Middle East, IS and violent conflict are changing realities on the ground and forcing multiple ethnic and religious groups to reconsider their options. In Kurdistan collapsing oil prices add to the cost of accommodating refugees and have altered what Patrick Osgood, the Kurdistan bureau chief for the Iraq Oil Report, calls "the mathematics of when the KRG can exit Iraq". Osgood notes that "the (demographic) numbers (now) weigh in favour of doing a deal within the federal system" of Iraq rather than opting for independence.

As noted by Fuad Hussein, Barzani's chief of staff: "You cannot sleep if ISIS is your neighbour. You will have many nightmares. The reality is now different. We are facing a threat ... the bubble has burst."

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