

The Saudi war in Iraq and lessons for Pakistan

The situation in Iraq should give pause to our 'strategic' deep thinkers. The group that calls itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which is also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, has taken Mosul and, as a result, the future of the nation state formerly known as Iraq is now in doubt. It is a situation that will likely escalate into a full-blown Shia-Sunni conflict in the Middle East.

Will Iraq disintegrate? The thing with nation states, as these were formed in the 20th century, is that they had attempted to draw borders around diverse people. This is truer of certain states more than others, especially Iraq, but to some extent also states like Turkey and Pakistan. A lot will depend on whether the autonomous Iraqi Kurdish region will now choose to take advantage of the current Shia-Sunni war and go its independent way or stand with the central government in its hour of need. Statesmanship demands that Kurdish leaders maintain the status quo and stick it out. If there has to be a move for Kurdish independence, it cannot be at this time. The idea of an autonomous Kurdistan within Iraq can be a model for many countries around the world but a separate Kurdistan will only serve to create similar impulses in other countries.

In the digital age, the demise of the very idea of the nation state has been brought about by the globalisation of ancient religious feuds. Saudi Arabia, which has for long seen itself as the vanguard of Wahabi-Sunni Islam, has been alarmed since the early days of the Iraq War by Iran's growing influence in Iraq and indeed states like Bahrain. Facing its own Shia problem, Saudi Arabia is now moving to counter this 'pernicious' influence by creating Sunni fiefdoms all around the Islamic world. Saudification of Sunni Islam worldwide in any event has been a long-standing project of the Kingdom, which has poured in huge sums of money into religious madrassas (seminaries) and mosques all around the world. The US's shortsighted policy in Syria and its colossal miscalculation of what the Arab Spring meant for the larger Middle East has directly contributed to this scenario. It is a case of the Arab Spring chickens coming home to roost.

The problem that this situation poses may have ancient origins but the problem itself is a very modern one: how does religion interact with established markers of modernity? Muslim modernism, which now is a century and a half old, sought to reconcile Islam with modern ideas by arguing for *ijtihad* (independent reasoning). Ultimately though, especially after the end of the Cold War, it was global Islamic revivalism that won the day. Muslim modernism was shunned as being intellectually shallow and, in some ways, apologetic. In comparison, the revivalist Islamic groups and the federated global jihad are unapologetic about what they want: world domination and an end to all creeds other than their own narrow-minded interpretation of Islam. A common thread between all

Saudi-funded Islamist militants, be they in Nigeria, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan or Pakistan, is their desire to create an 'Islamic caliphate'. The names they use — for example the Levant or more locally Khorasan — are an implicit rejection of the existing nation states in these regions. This implicit rejection is not always recognised for what it is and sometimes is an objective shared by the ruling elites. Erdogan for example seems to fantasise about resuscitating the Ottoman Empire, encouraging his followers to refer to him as 'Sultan'. Policymakers in Pakistan's establishment have long had the fantasy of a Pakistan extending all the way into Central Asia, united by Islam and Pakistan's army. What these would-be Islamic Napoleons forget is that they are playing with a fire they cannot possibly hope to control. These violent Islamist insurgencies everywhere will attempt to overthrow civil institutions and governments. Erdogan at the end of the day owes his legitimacy to the constitutional electoral process that elected him. If the cynical great gamers of the Pakistani establishment feel that they would be able to bring the Taliban and the Islamists under their control, it is a calculation that will cost them dearly. The time to reach out to Kabul and pledge complete unconditional cooperation is now. Pakistan is in perpetual search for a non-hostile actor in Afghan politics but somehow it fails to consider the possibility that the non-hostile actor may be the elected government of that country and not the Taliban. The reason for this analysis paralysis on the part of Pakistan's security establishment is that they are still caught up in the Cold War era and are unable to realise that the investment we made 30 years ago has now become a cost centre.

If Iran gets involved in Iraq, and it has already sent troops in some parts of the country, Pakistan will risk getting sucked into that predominantly sectarian conflict. That is the last thing Pakistan can afford to do given that it is home to the second largest Shia population in the world. Pakistan's leadership should stand decisively out of this war and concentrate on putting its own house in order. The first step would be to tell the Saudis to stop meddling in our affairs. We should not countenance even a single dirham from that country that may force us to take sides in the coming conflict.

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