

COMMENTARY

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Signs of Hope in the Middle East?

Don't Hold Your Breath

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Optimists see hopeful signs that the Middle East may be exiting from a dark tunnel of violence, civil war, sectarian strife, and debilitating regional rivalries. The Islamic State (IS) is on the cusp of territorial defeat in Syria and Iraq. Saudi Arabia may be groping for an exit from its devastating military intervention in Yemen. Gulf States are embarking on economic and social reform aimed at preparing for the end of oil.

Haltingly, Gulf States may be forced to find a face-saving solution to their more than three-month-old crisis that has pitted a UAE-Saudi led alliance against Qatar and there may even be an effort to dial down tension between the kingdom and Iran.

Hamas, the Islamist faction that controls Gaza said it was willing to negotiate with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas about joint rule of the strip and move towards long overdue elections. At first glance, reasons for optimism. But don't hold your breath. Optimists base their hopes on shifting sands and tentative suggestions that protagonists may be looking for ways out of the malaise.

Yet, none of the indicators involves actions that would tackle root causes of the Middle East multiple conflicts and problems. In fact, some of the solutions tossed around amount to little more than window dressing, while others set the stage for a next phase of conflict and strife.

Talks between the feuding Palestinian factions have repeatedly failed. It was not clear whether Hamas would be ready as part of a deal, to put its armed wing under Abbas's control – a key demand of the Palestinian president that the Islamists have so far rejected. It also remains to be

seen how Israel would respond. Israel together with the United States, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates sees Hamas as a terrorist organization. Beyond Palestine, the contours of future conflict are already discernible. If Myanmar's Rohingya are the 21st century's rallying cry of the Muslim world, the Kurds could be one of its major fault lines.

Disputes over territory, power and resources between and among Sunni Muslims, Shiites and Kurds that fuelled the rise of IS in Iraq are resurfacing with its demise. In a twist of irony, a recent poll showed Sunnis were for the first time more positive about Iraq's future than the country's majority Shiites.

Reconstruction of Sunni cities in the north destroyed by the fight against IS is key to maintaining a semblance of Iraqi unity. With no signs of massive reconstruction gaining momentum, old wounds that have driven insurgencies for more than a decade could reignite IS in new forms. "All the writing is on the wall that there will be another ISIS," said former Iraqi foreign minister and Kurdish politician Hoshiyar Zebari, referring to the group by another of its acronyms.

The initial flash in the pan threatens to be the fact that Iraqi Kurds are certain to vote for independence in a unilateral referendum scheduled for 25 September. If the independence issue did not provide enough explosives in and of itself, the Kurds' insistence on including in the referendum the ethnically mixed, oil-rich city of Kirkuk and adjacent areas further fuelled the fire.

The referendum and the dispute over Kirkuk reopen the question of what Iraqi Kurdistan's borders are even if the Kurds opt not to act immediately on a vote for independence and to remain part of an Iraqi federation for the time being.

The issue could blow a further hole into Iraq's already fragile existence as a united nation state. Iraqi President Haider al-Abadi has denounced the referendum. His efforts to persuade the Iraqi parliament to fire Kirkuk governor Najmaldin Karim for backing the poll as well as for calls for parliament to withdraw confidence in Iraqi President Fuad Masum and sack ministers and other senior officials of

Kurdish descent could push the Kurds over the edge. Iraqi military officials as well as the Iranian-backed Shiite militias that are aligned with the military have vowed to prevent the referendum from being held in Kirkuk. "Kirkuk belongs to Iraq. We would by no means give up on Kirkuk even if this were to cause major bloodshed," said Ayoub Faleh aka Abu Azrael, the commander of Imam Ali Division, an Iran-backed Iraqi Shiite militia.

A possible fight may not be contained to Kirkuk. Kurdish and Iraqi government forces vie for control of areas from which IS has been driven out stretch westwards along the length of

northern Iraq. Al-Abadi warned that he would intervene militarily if the referendum, which he described as unconstitutional, provoked violence.

Add to that, the ganging up on the Kurds by Iran, Turkey and the United States. The US backs the Iraqi government even if it put Kurdistan on course towards independence when it allowed the autonomous enclave to emerge under a protective no-fly zone that kept the forces of Saddam Hussein at bay. Breaking with the US and its Arab allies, Israel has endorsed Kurdish independence.

Turkish intelligence chief Hakan Fidan and Iranian Al Quds force commander Qassem Soleimani have warned the Kurds on visits to Iraqi Kurdistan to back away from the referendum. Iran has threatened to close its borders with the region.

Describing the referendum as “a matter of national security,” Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim said that “no one should have doubt that we will take all the necessary steps in this matter.” Turkey fears that Kurdish independence would spur secessionist aspirations among its own Kurds, who account for up to 20 per cent of its population and that an independent Kurdistan would harbour Turkish Kurdish insurgents already operating from the region.

Al-Abadi alluded to possible Turkish and/or Iranian military intervention to prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdistan by suggesting that the referendum would be “a public invitation to the countries in the region to violate Iraqi borders... The Turks are very angry about it because they have a large Kurdish population inside Turkey and they feel that their national security is threatened because it is a huge problem for them. And, of course, the Iranians are on the same line,” Al-Abadi said.

The Kurdish quest for some form of self-rule is likely to manifest itself in Syria too. The US backs a Syrian Kurdish militia aligned with Turkish Kurdish militants in its fight against IS. The militia that prides itself on its women fighters is among the forces besieging the IS capital of Raqqa.

The Kurds are hoping that an end to the war in Syria will leave them with an Iraq-style autonomous region on the Turkish border – an aspiration that Turkey, like in Iraq, vehemently opposes. The target of strikes by the Turkish air force, the Kurds hope to benefit from the force’s shortage of pilots because of mass purges in the wake of last year’s failed coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The air force last month ordered all former fighter pilots flying for Turkish airlines to report for service.

The Kurds may provide the first flashpoint for another round of volatility and violence, but they are not the only ones. Nor are sectarian and other ethnic divisions that are likely to wrack Iraq and Syria once the current round of fighting subsides.

Eager to find a face-saving exit from its ill-fated invasion of Yemen that has pushed the country to the edge of the abyss, Saudi Arabia will have to cope with a populous country on its border, many of whose citizens harbour deep-seated anger at the devastation and human suffering caused by the Saudis that will take years to reverse.

Similarly, the three-month-old rift between Qatar and an alliance led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates is likely to leave deep-seated scars that will hamper integration among the six Gulf States that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Middle East's only functioning regional organization prior to the crisis. A failure of talks between Qatar and its detractors, mediated by US President Donald J. Trump, even before they got started, suggested that a resolution to the crisis is nowhere in sight.

Coping with the fallout of the crisis and the Yemen war, simply adds to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's woes as he prepares to at some point succeed his ailing father, King Salman. Prince Mohammed, who is popular among the country's youth in expectation of economic and social change, has already had to backtrack on some of the promised change. Foreign lenders have moreover indicated a lack of confidence as they head for the exit rather than explore new opportunities.

In addition, Prince Mohammed has signalled concern about opposition to his proposed reforms within the kingdom's ruling Al Saud family, determination to avoid political change, and willingness to rule with an iron fist. Prominent religious scholars with significant followings and activists have been arrested in recent weeks while dissenting members of the ruling family have been put under house arrest.

The optimistic view may be that the Middle East is six years into an era of political, economic and social change. If historic yardsticks are applicable, that amounts to one third of a process of transition that can take up to quarter of a century to work itself out. There is little reason to believe that the next third will be any less volatile or violent.

Note: This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2017/09/signs-of-hope-in-middle-east-dont-hold.html>

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