

Iraq and Syria: Diversity threatened and destroyed

Plea for a peace-conference of the regional powers

IS – Islamic State – has been in headlines everywhere recently. But what happened in both Arab countries Iraq and Syria that made it possible for Islamist terrorists to wreak havoc there? Some 20 different ethnic and religious groups have lived for centuries in the region that today is Iraq and Syria. People of diverse heritages lived side by side. Now they are separated by walls, checkpoints, regional conflicts and civil wars.

How could this happen?

Following World War I, the colonial powers England and France created Syria and Iraq from the remains of the Ottoman Empire. The areas home to different ethnic and religious groups were in many cases divided by artificial borders. After World War II, Arab nationalism was used to give people a new, inclusive identity. The president-generals Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Hafez al-Assad in Syria gave their regimes additional legitimacy through “Arab socialism,” in which state revenues were made available to people throughout society as hospitals, schools, roads, housing and jobs. Hussein and Assad turned their countries into modern societies as a result. Almost all social classes benefitted. People married outside of their ethnic and religious groups and moved into newly built residential areas. In general, the lifestyle was western. The “presidential dictatorships” in both countries were widely popular.

Beginning in the 1980s, however, the ruling elites in Bagdad and Damascus replaced their generous policies designed to promote modernization and help everyone with a strategy driven by egotistical greed that had

the goal of ensuring their own power and wealth.

The ruling clans used the economic opportunities arising from globalization exclusively to their own benefit. They made state-run companies their personal property and established businesses that controlled lucrative trading areas and had sole access to financial resources. These economic policies gave rise to corruption, nepotism and the acquisition of wealth by a select few. Social imbalances became apparent. Impoverished neighborhoods developed in which Islamists increasingly became responsible for the social welfare.

Hussein and Assad used the end of the Cold War to gain territory by shifting colonial borders in their own favor. The Syrians helped inflame Lebanon’s civil war and, as of 1991, became the country’s ruler-by-proxy. Hussein was even more brazen. He began an eight-year war with Iran and occupied the oilproducing emirate of Kuwait in 1990.

These militaristic adventures and the countries’ failed social policies undermined the legitimacy of Hussein’s and Assad’s

regimes. Opposition grew among certain segments of the population. In order to remain in power, both leaders expanded their secret police and played off the ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs of their citizens – once believed to have lost their importance – against each other. Once they promoted diversity, now they threatened it.

The end of diversity in Syria. As early as 1982, an uprising among the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood in impoverished Hama was brutally put down when government forces destroyed the entire city center. Hafez al-Assad's son Bashar reacted to his subjects' peaceful revolt in 2011 with gunfire – instead of inclusion, compromise and reform, effectively starting a civil war. The Alawite minority, to which Assad belongs, began fighting the Sunni majority, the Kurds dissociated themselves from the others, the Christians found themselves caught between the fronts and everyone became more radical. In 2013 the civil war took an even more dramatic and grotesque turn: Instead of really fighting each other, Islamist terrorists belonging to IS, supported by parts of the Sunni population, joined mostly Assad's troops to combat the various revolutionary factions and the Free Syrian Army. The result was nearly 200,000 dead and 10 million Syrian refugees. An end to the war is still nowhere in sight. The hatred between the country's ethnic and religious groups is now considerable. Syria has become a failed state that has disintegrated into areas controlled by four different groups: Assad's forces, IS, rebel groups and Kurds.

The end of diversity in Iraq. After American troops drove Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991, his power began crumbling at home. Kurds in the north and Shiites in the south began demanding more autonomy. The Iraqi leader managed to maintain his centralized Sunni state nonetheless, fighting the Kurds

and oppressing the Shiites. Throughout the country, the pictures of Hussein dressed as a general disappeared from public view and were replaced with images of Hussein as a humble believer making a pilgrimage to Mecca. Islam was used to provide legitimacy for his dictatorship, with Sunni adherents serving as his power base. It thus came as no surprise that once the Americans occupied the country in 2003, the Kurds gradually established their own state in the north and Shiites replaced Sunnis as the power brokers in central Iraq. The Sunni minority has never really recovered from the loss of power following Hussein's ouster. On the other hand, the Shiite majority that has ruled the country since 2003 – in particular since Nuri al-Maliki has been prime minister (since 2006) – has never truly tried to share political power, or the country's oil revenues, with the Sunnis.

The disappointments suffered by the Sunni minority in Iraq and the Sunni majority in Syria, which feels betrayed, are what have propelled IS from victory to victory since 2013 in the civil wars in both Syria and Iraq. IS has gained control of a wide swath of ground extending from the provincial capital Raqqa in eastern Syria to western Iraq, including the provincial capital Mosul. They seized modern weapons and ruled about oilfields and barrages. They are joined by mercenaries, fanatics, Sunni tribal leaders and former members of security services. In addition, the group's interpretation of religious texts is alarming. The regime it has imposed is particularly brutal: All non-Sunnis are either being forced to flee or are being killed.

With that, the diversity once found in Iraq and Syria is, for the most part, no more. Hardship, conflict, war and chaos have caused people to withdraw into their religious and ethnic identities. While Baghdad's various neighborhoods were once home to people of

all backgrounds, the city's inhabitants now live in segregated districts surrounded by high walls and accessible only through checkpoints. Other Iraqis have fled to other parts of the country or to neighboring states. They now share the tragic fate of their Syrian neighbors, one-third of whom are now also refugees. Current sad climax: The expulsion and mass-murder of Yazidis, Turkmen and Christians in northern Iraq and the threat of the autonomous Kurdish region. In addition, IS and Assad-fighters circling rebel strongholds in Aleppo.

The governments in Teheran and Riyadh share responsibility for the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Iran views itself as the protector of the Shiites in the Middle East and is a supporter of Shia militias in Iraq and Assad in Damascus. Saudi Arabia considers itself the protector of the Sunnis and supports various Islamist groups and Sunni fighters in Iraq and Syria. IS is being funded by various sources in the Gulf region. The Turkish government under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is keen to prevent the formation of a Kurdish state on the country's border and is supporting Sunni combatants in Syria.

... It is a seemingly Gordian knot of conflict and warfare, one without any clear outcome and with considerable potential for further volatility. Something must be done...

A seemingly irresolvable tangle of war and conflict with an unclear outcome and other explosive power. It is necessary to act ...

1. Terrorists must be fought.
2. The Syrian and Iraqi refugees need more assistance.
3. All ethnic and religious groups have a right to political, social and economic participation; Syrians and Iraqis must make new social contracts among each other. This seems hopeless in the face of bloody everyday life, but is essential for

the future. As a first step it is necessary to push the designated Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi, really to form an inclusive government of national unity. Washington and Tehran have the best access here.

4. Saudi Arabia and Iran urgently need the negotiating table, so that thus at least some regional differences between both powers are settled peacefully and separated from local detonators. As an intermediary, the European Union and the Organization of Islamic States can act. The dynamics in the nuclear negotiations between the EU3+3 and Iran can support regional willingness to talk.
5. In addition to Iran and Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are influential and still intact national states with partly conflicting interests in Syria and Iraq. Almost all six governments must be involved in a common negotiating context. The EU holds good relations to all these regional powers; therefore, Brussels should trigger this political initiative.

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For more information:

Spotlight Europe #2013/02: [Syria: From Rebellion to All-Out War](#)

Regional Report [Middle East and North Africa](#) from the 2014 Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index (BTI). In recent years Iraq and Syria have been among the poorest performers in the BTI governance rankings.