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Middle East: Three nations, one conflict

By Borzou Daragahi

The crises in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon are merging into a single sectarian war

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On the line: A Kurdish fighter on the Turkey-Iraq border. Kurds from several villages in oil-rich Hasake province are fighting groups affiliated to al-Qaeda

Iraqi forces have stepped up their patrols along the barren 605km Syrian border recently, but they admit they have very little to show for it. The flow of guns, fighters and money moving in and out of Iraq has just grown too heavy to control.

One day this spring they caught a convoy of fighters from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or Isis, starting a firefight, only to hear word two days later of an even larger convoy that had made its way past them. The best the border controls can do is serve as the eyes and ears of Baghdad.

“We maintain a strong presence on the border to try to cut their supply lines, but mostly to try to find out what is happening on other side,” says Brigadier General Saad Maan Ibrahim, spokesman for Iraq’s interior ministry. “It is clear that what is happening in Syria is impacting us and hurting the Iraqi people directly. If there is any problem in Syria or fresh outbreak of violence in Syria, this will be reflected in Iraq.”

Lebanese and Iraqi Shia militiamen take up arms in Syrian towns and cities. Syrian insurgents set off bombs in southern Beirut. Sunni fighters flow from Syria to Iraq, where they battle government troops on the outskirts of Baghdad, while Lebanese and Palestinian Sunnis in Lebanon fight in the Syrian city of Homs. Governments in Baghdad and Beirut, backed by their patron in Tehran, look the other way – or sometimes help – as arms and fighters make their way into Syria for battles from Aleppo to Damascus to Deraa.

This is more than just the “spillover” from the Syria conflict analysts warned about when the uprising against Bashar al-Assad began in 2011. The various conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon are increasingly merging into one war stretching from the Zagros Mountains to the Mediterranean Sea in what the writer Rami Khoury calls “a single operational arena in terms of the ease of movement of fighters and weapons”.

While few believe that the map of the region is about to be redrawn, the emerging conflict represents a dangerous breakdown of the nation states created in the Sykes-Picot agreement sealed by French and British colonial overlords 90 years ago.

“This region, the Levant, never had national identities or entities before Sykes-Picot,” says Paul Salem of the Middle East Institute in Washington. “The identities, unlike the countries, tend to be cross-border – because you have Shi’ite here and here, Sunni here and here, and Kurd here and here.”

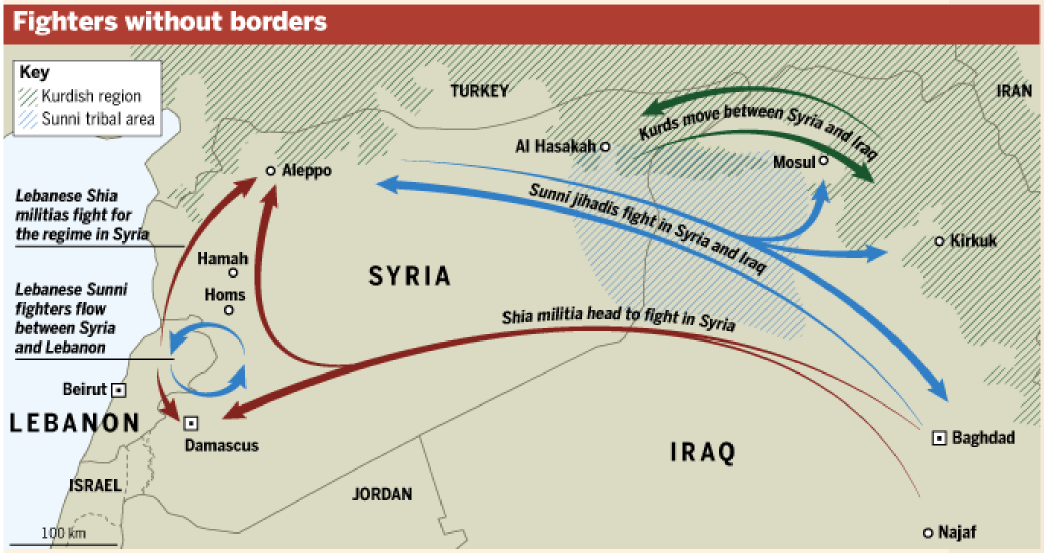
In its duration, geographic scope and extent of its foreign involvement, the conflict resembles the 30 years war, the series of conflicts rooted in religious differences between Protestants and Catholics that devastated 17th-century central Europe.

‘More dangerous than Afghanistan’

The war this time generally pits three increasingly allied Shia-dominated governments in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon against Sunni rebels who appear to be learning tactics from each other and sharing resources. The governments are also taking varied levels of direction from Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s regime in Iran. Weaponry supporting the Syrian regime comes from Russia, which with China provides cover from the UN Security Council.

“It’s all one arena under the control of Khamenei,” says Dhaffar al-Ani, an Iraqi Sunni politician. “It’s a Shia-Russian alliance.”

Fighters without borders


Key
▨ Kurdish region
▨ Sunni tribal area
TURKEY
IRAN
Kurds move between Syria and Iraq
Al Hasakah
Mosul
Aleppo
Lebanese Shia militias fight for the regime in Syria
Sunni jihadis fight in Syria and Iraq
Kirkuk
Hamah
SYRIA
Homs
Lebanese Sunni fighters flow between Syria and Lebanon
Shia militia head to fight in Syria
Beirut
LEBANON
Damascus
Baghdad
IRAQ
ISRAEL
JORDAN
100 km
Najaf

The other side in the conflict also receives backing from powerful foreign patrons, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey the United Arab Emirates and the west, which supplies training and weapons to the rebels in Syria as well as political support to sympathetic Sunni and allied factions in Lebanon.

The stoking of Kurdish national aspirations and the assertive emergence of al-Qaeda and its offshoots – including the ambitious Isis – as major forces in areas outside the control of the three countries’ central governments has raised the stakes further. Together, these factors have compounded the dangers in the oil and gas-rich region sitting along Nato’s southeast frontier.

“This is qualitatively different from the contained war in Iraq in the 2000s or the Lebanese civil war of the 1970s and 80s,” says Kirk Sowell, an analyst for Uticensis, a risk-management firm. “What’s happening is potentially far more dangerous than what was happening in Afghanistan in the 1990s.”

A 35-year war

Like the 30 years war, which spelt the end of the Holy Roman Empire, this one is rooted in the breakdown of an old order. The radical Shia clerics who replaced Shah Mohammed-Reza Pahlavi in Iran in 1979 created a new anti-western bloc opposed to the Sunni-dominated moderate regimes led by Saudi Arabia and its patron, the US. Sunni regimes hit back by supporting Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq war, which along with the last decade of the Lebanese civil war, could be seen as an early phase of the longer conflict.

> “People don’t have any rules to go by. They have to obey the people with guns who moved to their neighbourhood”

But the outlines of the war now raging across the Levant and Mesopotamia became clearer after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. The election of a Shia-dominated government in Baghdad gave Iran influence in its former rival, while enraged Sunnis took up arms – first against the American occupiers, then against Baghdad. The largely Sunni 2011 uprising against Mr Assad’s heterodox Shia Alawite regime and the Damascus government’s harsh response engulfed the region in a still-expanding war.

“The worst thing is there is no solution on the horizon,” warns Ali Mousawi, spokesman for Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. “That means this problem will keep growing.”

As in the 30 years war, local or regional leaders – whether Syria's Mr Assad, Lebanon-based Hizbollah's Hassan Nasrallah, Iraq's Mr Maliki or Masoud Barzani of Iraqi Kurdistan – struggle to maintain control over amorphous statelets and appeal to potential foreign backers for help.

Iran and Russia serve as the patrons for the Shia-dominated or Shia offshoot governments in Beirut, Baghdad and Damascus, hoping to counter the power of the US and the west. Saudi Arabia and its allies back the Sunnis, hoping to counter Iran. The US and EU cautiously seek to identify allies from foes amid a dizzying and ever-changing cast of militia leaders, jihadi adventurers, sectarian politicians and rogue gangs dressed up as political groups.

Hell for civilians

Like the 30 years war, civilian populations endure terrible warfare and marauding. Some German states lost 70 per cent of their populations during the mayhem of the 17th-century conflict. Perhaps 200 people a day or more now die in political violence across Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, a trio of countries comprising 60m people.

With about 9m of Syria's 25m inhabitants displaced, the UN has called the Syria conflict the worst man-made humanitarian crisis since the second world war. Thanks to the Assad regime's relentless air campaigns on civilian neighbourhoods, Syria's economy and infrastructure have been devastated, and large stretches of major cities, including Aleppo and Homs, lie in rubble.

In Iraq, where Sunnis rose up 11 years ago after the toppling of Saddam Hussein, about 200,000 civilians have been killed in crossfire, bombings and assassinations. Violence has picked up again as Sunni insurgents, inspired by the war in Syria, target security officials and Shia civilians. Shia militias such as Esahib al-Haq have responded with targeted death-squad assassinations of Sunni civilians.

In Lebanon, a small, weak and religiously diverse country nestled between Syria and Israel, soldiers, combatants and civilians die in clashes that stretch from the southern city of Sidon to the northern city of Tripoli. Once a tourist magnet, many of the visitors Lebanon now hosts are Iraqis and Syrians seeking a haven.

“ These tribes are mixed between Syria and Iraq. They share the same grandfathers. They don't take orders from the state ”

For the civilians caught in the crossfire, “it's chaos, it's a total jungle, it's hell,” says Mr Khoury, who teaches political science at the American University of Beirut.

“People don't have any rules to go by,” he adds. “They have to obey the rules of the people with guns that have moved into their neighbourhood. The tragedy is that ordinary people most affected have the least to say about how the war is conducted.”

Borders and states

No major power has an interest in redrawing the map of the Middle East in the way the 30 years war drastically redefined Europe. But perhaps the more lasting and potentially devastating legacy of the conflict could be the gradual degradation of the very ideas of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq as national entities.

Borders once traversed only by hardy smugglers are becoming increasingly permeable as sectarian and regional identities assert themselves. Hisham Hashem, a researcher and commentator writing a book on armed groups, notes that eight major Sunni tribes straddle the Iraq-Syria border, each of them being drawn into conflicts on either side.

“These tribes are mixed between Syria and Iraq. They share the same grandfathers,” says Mr Hashem. “They don't take orders from the state.”

Kurds in Iraq attempt to control political developments in a semi-autonomous enclave they carved out in Syria, while Syrian Kurds use northern Iraq as a strategic and logistical way station. Kurdish fighters of the Kurdistan Workers party, many of whom spent their lives in Iraq and Turkey, now go to the self-declared self-rule area of Rojava in Syria.

Militants from the outskirts of Deir Azour along the river Euphrates in Syria show up in Baghdad, where they sell stolen jewellery and looted artefacts to buy weapons.

Sunni Lebanese and Palestinian militants who began their careers as fighters in southern or northern Lebanon fight in Syria before circulating back home for new battles.

Maysoon Damlouji, a member of Iraq's parliament, said she has seen young men boarding late-night flights from Baghdad to Beirut to defend the holy shrine of Sayyida Zeinab, the revered daughter of the Shia saint Ali who is buried near Damascus.

“The government is allowing Iraqis to go fight in Syria under the pretence of defending Sayyida Zeinab,” she says. “The Iraqis are fighting on both sides of the Syria war.”

Swaths of Lebanon have long been beyond the control of the central government in Beirut. Now, vast tracts of Iraq and Syria also lie beyond their governments’ authority.

> “ We are not saying we are friends with the Syrian regime; we actually consider ourselves a victim of the Syrian regime ”

Isis, often derisively referred to by its Arabic acronym Daish, has begun setting up a proto-state in parts of Syria and Iraq, with its own courts, police and public services. It appears to be expanding its influence from Anbar to Baghdad and Diyala provinces.

“They attack important government districts in Baghdad, universities, military bases, supermarkets,” says Ali Sarai, an editor at the Iraqi newspaper, Sabah al-Jadeed, in Baghdad. “This sends the message they can attack any place any time.”

Echo chamber

Governments and militants are making decisions not in response to actual threats on the ground but in response to regional fears. Mr Maliki recently took to dropping explosives-laden barrel bombs on Fallujah, using a technique that has had devastating consequences for Syrian civilians in Aleppo.

To many, the conflict between Iraqi troops and insurgents already resembles the sectarian civil war in Syria. Just as sectarian clashes in the Lebanese city of Tripoli have come to resemble those of the Syrian city of Homs, Anbar province in Iraq resembles Deir Azzour in Syria.

“Maliki is afraid what happened in Syria will come to Baghdad,” says Mr Sarai. “But the military operation is not the right solution. That makes all the Sunni people against the central government. Iraqi Sunnis are completely different from Syrian Sunnis because Iraqi Sunnis want to be part of the Iraqi government.”

On Iraq’s Sunni Baghdadiya television channel, Mr Sowell recently found himself briefly disoriented while listening to a news report. “You have Sunnis that talk about the revolutionaries in Anbar using the same language as when they talk about Syria. On the Sunni continuum you have this sort of common ideology. The Syrian and Iraqi Sunnis are almost interchangeable.”

On the Shia side, Esahib al-Haq and other groups are gearing up to do battle in Syria. Even the government says it respects those who go to defend Sayyida Zeinab, and says it cannot do anything about them.

“We are not saying we are friends with the Syrian regime; we actually consider ourselves a victim of the Syrian regime,” says Hussein Shahrestani, Iraq’s deputy prime minister. “But al-Qaeda and the *takfiris* [Muslims who accuse other Muslims of apostasy] are worse enemies to us and the Syrians and the people of the region than any other group. ”

Rock bottom?

The strong emergence of the broad threat by al-Qaeda and its offshoots, including Isis and Jabhat al-Nusra, represents the gravest threat to the future of the region.

But it might also have brought some of the regional powers to their senses, forcing regional players into a future Peace of Westphalia, which ended the 30 years war, to come together to work on de-escalating the conflict instead of pushing to win it. In recent weeks, Saudi Arabia’s foreign minister publicly invited his Iranian counterpart to visit Riyadh.

The emir of Kuwait, a strong supporter of the rebel cause with tribal ties to eastern Syria, announced that he would visit Tehran. Jordan and Turkey, strong supporters of the Sunni rebellion, have clamped down on jihadi fighters moving in and out of the war zone.

“We’re starting to see signs of Saudis and Iranians playing footsie,” says Mr Khoury. “I think we’ve finally reached the low point of the war because there’s so much fear among the establishments in the region.”