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Redrawn Lines Seen as No Cure in Iraq Conflict

By ROBERT F. WORTH JUNE 26, 2014

ISTANBUL — Over the past two weeks, the specter that has haunted Iraq since its founding 93 years ago appears to have become a reality: the de facto partition of the country into Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish cantons.

With jihadists continuing to entrench their positions across the north and west, and the national army seemingly incapable of mounting a challenge, Americans and even some Iraqis have begun to ask how much blood and treasure it is worth to patch the country back together.

It is a question that echoes not only in Syria — also effectively divided into mutually hostile statelets — but also across the entire Middle East, where centrifugal forces unleashed by the Arab uprisings of 2011 continue to erode political structures and borders that have prevailed since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire a century ago.

Yet Iraq and Syria's potential fragmentation along sectarian or ethnic lines is not likely to offer any solution to the region's dysfunction, analysts say, and may well generate new conflicts driven by ideology, oil, and other resources.

“At least a third of the country is beyond Baghdad's control, not counting Kurdistan,” said Zaid al Ali, an Iraqi analyst and the author of “The Struggle for Iraq's Future.” “But any effort to make that official would likely lead to an even greater disaster — not least because of the many mixed areas of the country, including Baghdad, where blood baths would surely ensue as

different groups tried to establish facts on the ground.”

The Obama administration has urged Iraqi politicians of different sects to come together, repeating admonitions that were so often heard in the years after the 2003 invasion. But the Pentagon — reluctant to commit more manpower to a complex and profoundly uncertain conflict — has quietly hinted it could live with Iraq’s current division, despite the dangers posed by a potential new terrorist sanctuary in the deserts linking Syria and Iraq.

The context this time is different from a decade ago: Sectarian hatred has begun to alter the region’s political DNA in ways that make the old borders more vulnerable. Many ordinary Sunnis describe the seizing of Mosul and other cities as a popular revolution against a Shiite-led government, not a terrorist onslaught. With Iran, their historic enemy, now lining up drones and other military supplies to help the government of Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki retake the north — and protect the south — many Sunnis may become further alienated from the state.

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, which supplied the shock troops of the assault on Mosul, has made vigorous efforts to inculcate a new identity for those living within its growing transnational sphere, setting up Shariah courts and publicizing videos in which its fighters burn their passports. Last week, the group issued an eight-page report denouncing the Middle Eastern border system as a colonialist imposition, and included photographs of its fighters destroying what it called “crusader partitions” between Iraq and Syria.

At the same time, the ISIS onslaught has made the formal secession of Iraqi Kurdistan far more plausible. The crisis led Iraqi soldiers to flee from Kirkuk, the contested oil-rich northern city that was among the last major obstacles to Kurdish independence. Across the border in Syria, a Kurdish region in the country’s north is also effectively independent of Damascus, with its own military and provisional government. And Turkey, which in the past strongly opposed an independent Kurdish state on its border, now sees the Kurds as a stable buffer between itself and the extremists of ISIS.

The division of Iraq into three parts has been proposed in the past as a

solution to the country's problems. In 2006, Joseph R. Biden Jr., then a senator, promoted the idea, invoking a comparison with the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and the Dayton Accords in the mid-1990s. But much has changed over the past eight years: Division is now largely a fait accompli. Reversing it would take enormous resources, even if the United States and Iran were to find ways to cooperate toward that goal — a convergence that would itself enrage and perhaps radicalize many of the region's Sunni Arabs.

For the most part, Iraqis (with the exception of the Kurds) reject the idea of partition, according to recent interviews and opinion polls taken several years ago. In that sense, Iraq forms a striking contrast with the former Yugoslavia, where militias worked consciously from the start to carve out new and ethnically exclusive national enclaves. The sectarian strain may have led to Iraq's current impasse, but it coexists with other sources of regional and ideological solidarity, some deeply rooted in history.

Partly for that reason, many analysts say, the current division of Iraq — while it may prove irreversible in the end — does not represent a return to a more authentic or harmonious dispensation, nor is it likely to better address the Middle East's sources of political and social failure.

“You could split these countries into two or three or four, and you'd have the same practice of power in each of those units,” said Peter Harling, a senior analyst at the International Crisis Group who spent 15 years living in Iraq and Syria. “The problem is the divisive and autocratic and corrupt way power is practiced, not the borders.”

For all the jihadis' boasts about founding a new caliphate — or Islamic state — the prospects of building any sort of cohesive or sustainable new Sunni entity in the region are slim. Already, there have been reports of factional battles among the gunmen who captured Mosul two weeks ago. The jihadists' main partner in the north is a network of Iraqi Baathist former military officers with links to Sufism, an Islamic sect the jihadists view as heretical.

There are also renewed signs of division among the Shiites, including the refusal of Moktada al-Sadr, who commands the powerful militia known

as the Mahdi Army, to fight under the banner of the Iraqi Army. Similar divisions among Shiite factions have often led to violence in the past, including the 2008 battle in Basra between Mr. Maliki's forces and the Mahdi Army.

The logistical obstacles may be larger than the ideological ones. In Syria, it is often assumed that President Bashar al-Assad could lead a retreat to the Alawite heartland along the Mediterranean coast, an area that briefly enjoyed statehood under the French protectorate after World War I. But his government views that territory as far too vulnerable because it is cut off from Syria's main water sources and because it would lack the major cities that are at the core of the economy, said Joshua Landis, a Syria expert at the University of Oklahoma.

Similar problems would afflict any effort to forge a new Sunni state in Iraq and Syria. For such a state to become sustainable it would need a real economy, and for that, it would require a major city — Aleppo is the only option — and probably a port on the Mediterranean, Mr. Landis said. Negotiating a land corridor that would achieve those goals without endangering the Alawite state would be nearly impossible, he added.

In Iraq, it has long been assumed that the Shiite heartland of southern Iraq, where the major oil fields are, would give the Shiites a tremendous advantage, leaving the Sunnis with only the vast landlocked deserts to the north and west. But northern Iraq also controls both of the country's major rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, which flow southward toward Basra. That could provide one more reason for Mr. Maliki, or his successors, to fight hard for the recapture of the north and west.

The prospect of a more formal partition in Iraq or Syria, however unlikely that may seem right now, could also lead to mass migrations and further turmoil, judging by some recent examples of state partition, like the division of Sudan in 2011, or that of India and Pakistan in 1947. Those breakups were the result of long struggles and led to terrible violence.

In light of all this, many analysts say it is far more likely that the current Arab borders will persist, and greater power will ultimately be devolved to

provinces and cities — a process that has already been underway since the Arab uprisings. In Yemen, another country where insurgency has effectively divided the country, there has been extensive discussion of a plan to designate six new federal regions, each with substantial autonomy.

Iraq's Constitution already allows such federal devolution to be worked out. But in their current polarized state, Iraq's leaders scarcely seem capable of agreeing on anything.

“Fundamentally, we have to answer the question: Do we Iraqis want to live in the same country?” said Feisal al-Istrabadi, an Iraqi diplomat who teaches law at Indiana University. “If we don't, then we need to find a better way to separate than what we're doing right now.”

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