



# Twin fates

Both the Syrian and Iraqi states appear to be fragmenting, and unlikely to survive within the boundaries fashioned by Western powers after World War I

**EVEN AS** the attention of the international media shifted away from the issue of Damascus's chemical weapons to the Tehran-Washington pas de deux, the grim toll of Syria's unending civil war has mounted – at a rate of more than 150 persons per day. And even further under the radar has been the renewal of large-scale bloodshed in neighboring Iraq, where some 3,000 people, mostly civilians, have died in terror bombings since July, and more than 5,000 since the year began. Moreover, the two conflict situations are intertwined, in a myriad of ways.

The modern states of Iraq and Syria were born out of the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, and the establishment of British and French Mandates over its former territories in the Near East. As artificial constructs lacking the requisite amounts of social and political cohesion, they would eventually epitomize what came to be known as *dawlat al-mukhabarat* – mutually hostile repressive regimes dominated by their internal security services and ruling clans, and overlaid by a veneer of Ba'athist Arab nationalist ideology that masked the domination of these multi-ethnic, multi-confessional entities by Syria's Alawite, and Iraq's Sunni Arab minorities respectively.

Contrary to the hopes of American policymakers and some secular Iraqi intellectuals, post-Saddam Hussein Iraq did not emerge as a model for aspiring democrats across the region; and the vision of a civic Iraqi nationalism emerging from the rubble of Saddam's "republic of fear," one that would include Iraq's long-repressed Kurdish minority, proved to be a pipe dream. Instead, Iraq became the scene of horrific violence – some 125,000 civilian fatalities in the decade since Saddam's overthrow – much of it owing to power struggles along the Shi'a-Sunni fault line, but also on the backdrop of rifts and rivalries within both the Sunni and Shi'a Arab communities.

During the peak years of violence (2005-07), Iraqi refugees flowed into Syria, while Bashar Assad's regime in Damascus turned a blind eye to the steady stream of young Sunni men from Syria into Iraq in support of the al-Qaida Iraq franchise's *jihad* against US forces and the Shi'a-dominated government in Baghdad. Directing the energies of frustrated Syrian Sunni youth elsewhere and undermining the American project in Iraq was deemed more important than bolstering the Baghdad government that was paradoxically supported not only by the US but also by Syria's strategic ally, Iran.

In recent months, the tables have turned. Young Iraqi Sunnis, along with others from across the region, have made their way to Syria to join Islamist radicals who are now taking a leading role in the war against the Assad regime and its Shi'a Hezbollah and Iranian supporters. The umbrella organization of Iraqi *jihadi* Islamists has now been rebranded as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (the Levant/Greater Syria), and has been taking an active role in recent heavy fighting in Syria's northern regions, not only against government forces, but other Syrian opposition forces, too, including armed groups of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD).

Numbering perhaps 10 percent of the Syrian population, Syrian Kurds, many of them deprived of Syrian citizenship and living in the



A Kurdish fighter from the Popular Protection Units (YPG) takes position atop a building under the YPG flag in Aleppo, Syria

remote northeast of the country, are now an integral part of the Kurdish ethno-national assertion across the region. The PYD has established autonomous governing mechanisms and defense units to fill the vacuum left by the contracting Syrian state.

Unfortunately, the war's encroachment on their region has generated in recent months a flow of more than 200,000 Syrian Kurdish refugees to the relative safety of the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq. And even there, all is not entirely quiet. On September 29, coordinated bombing attacks on the KRG's internal security headquarters and Interior Ministry, in Irbil, left six people dead and 36 wounded.

Speculation regarding the perpetrators was rife, and ranged from the al-Qaida Islamists fighting the Kurds in Syria, to the Baghdad government that was keen on warning the KRG not to pursue even greater autonomy, to the commander of Iran's elite al-Quds force, Qasim Solaimani, who was reportedly angered by the KRG's refusal to grant passage to Iranian arms shipments to the Assad regime.

The bombings notwithstanding, the Kurdish Regional Government of northern Iraq is an increasingly de facto independent entity, and is spearheading the broader movement for Kurdish self-assertion across the region. The imminent completion of an oil pipeline to Turkey will enable it to further establish its independence from Baghdad.

Elections to the KRG's parliament were recently conducted, against Baghdad's wishes, and Irbil is planning to host an unprecedented gathering next month of Kurdish groups from across "greater Kurdistan" (i.e. Turkey, Iran, Syria and the diaspora).

At this point, both the Syrian and Iraqi states appear to be fragmenting, and unlikely to survive within the boundaries fashioned by Western powers after World War I, boundaries that pointedly excluded the Kurds. ■

*The author is a Principal Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University*