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Mideast's worst case: A 'big war' pitting Shia Muslims against Sunni

By Roy Gutman

6/10/2015

The Middle East crisis that peaked one year ago Wednesday when the Islamic State captured Mosul may result in the breakup of Iraq and an indefinite continuation of a war in Syria that's already out of control, analysts say.

Yet still worse things could happen.

“The conditions are very much like 1914,” says Michael Stephens of the Royal United Service Institute in London. “All it will take is one little spark, and Iran and Saudi Arabia will go at each other, believing they are fighting a defensive war.”

Hiwa Osman, an Iraqi Kurdish commentator, was even more blunt: “The whole region is braced for the big war, the war that has not yet happened, the Shiite-Sunni war.”

U.S. and foreign experts say the U.S still has not developed a strategy for dealing with the Sunni extremists who now hold more territory Iraq and Syria than one year ago. President Barack Obama on Monday acknowledged that the U.S. strategy in Iraq was a work in progress. “We don’t have, yet, a complete strategy, because it requires commitments on the part of Iraqis as well,” Obama said at the close of the G-7 summit in Germany. “The details are not worked out.”

The experts criticize America’s detachment from the four wars now under way in the region. And they say the Obama administration is banking on Iran to stabilize the region, a very dubious course.

We really don’t have a strategy at all. We’re basically playing this day by day,” Robert Gates, a former secretary of defense, told MSNBC last month.

The one conflict where the U.S. has poured money, weapons and military advisers is Iraq, but the outlook after the Sunni city of Ramadi fell to the Sunni extremists is for a long, drawn-out conflict.

John Allen, the former retired Marine Corps general who serves as U.S. envoy to the global coalition fighting the Islamic State, told an audience in Qatar last week that it “will be a long campaign” and defeating its ideology will take “a generation or more.”

Allen laid out five areas for cooperation against the Islamic State – denying “safe haven” to its forces, disrupting the flow of foreign fighters, curbing access to foreign finances, providing humanitarian relief and responding to group’s propaganda.

But he made no mention of addressing the political causes that allowed the Islamic State to take root in Iraq – disaffection by Sunnis with their treatment by the Shiite-led central government.

“IS cannot be ended by Kurds, Shiites, Americans or Iran. It has to be done by Sunni Arabs,” said Osman. “You need to present them with a deal for the day after IS is defeated. And no one has managed to articulate that vision for them,” he said.

Conceivably, that would be a federal system that ends Shiite domination of the security services, but most importantly secures reconciliation with Baathists, members of the party that ruled Iraq under the late dictator Saddam Hussein. Baathists are said to comprise a great many of the top positions in the Islamic State military apparatus.

“I am extremely pessimistic” about the future of Iraq, said Toby Dodge, a leading scholar on Iraq who teaches at the London School of Economics. He said he doubted that Prime Minister Haider al Abadi, “a very decent man, a smart man,” could save Iraq. But “he’s hostage to his own constituency, radical Shiite Islamism. What he needs is to appeal to the disenfranchised Sunnis of the northwest.”

He said an Iraqi civil war “is almost unavoidable.”

Some Iraq scholars argue that the country can be saved. Decentralization of power, reconciliation with Baathists and other concessions that would motivate Sunnis to oust the Islamic State are “feasible, absolutely,” says Kenneth Pollack of the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank.

But he said the administration is not making the effort.

“I believe it is negligence,” he said. “They continue to insist we can’t want this more than the Iraqis. . . . This is historical nonsense. If you leave it to the Iraqis, they won’t do the right thing even if they want to.”

The other big issue left out of Allen’s presentation was a strategy for Syria, where the Islamic State has its headquarters. Pro-Western rebel forces are willing to fight the Islamic State but insist on also taking on the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad, which has permitted the Islamic State to seize and hold territory, mostly without a fight.

Last week, when Islamic State forces advanced on the country’s biggest city, Aleppo, the regime bombed rebels, not Islamic State forces. In response to rebel pleas, the U.S. mounted one airstrike Sunday against the Islamic State, but it didn’t coordinate it with fighters on the ground. This has raised suspicions that U.S. won’t block the Islamic State from advancing on Aleppo.

“I just don’t think they care,” said Pollack.

What worries scholars and expert observers the most is the seeming U.S. detachment from the region’s wars – in Syria and Iraq, from Yemen, where Saudi forces are bombing pro-Iranian insurgents, and from Libya, where Egypt has mounted airstrikes against Islamic State -linked insurgents.

Everyone agrees that the international system is very different from 1914, when the two competing European alliances went to war. But there are similarities.

That was “a crisis nobody wanted to have. When it came, it would be over in a few months’ time. It would end all wars. Everybody knows what happened,” said Thorbjorn Jagland, a Norwegian politician and secretary general of the Council of Europe, a human rights watchdog body.

“I don’t want to call the leaders today sleepwalkers, but maybe they have entered into a situation that nobody intended or wanted,” he said.

“There are too many actors and too many unknowns. Everyone seems to be stuck in his own way,” said Altay Cengizer, director of policy planning at the Turkish Foreign Ministry. He warned of the dangers of a prolonged crisis. “We are playing with fire,” he said. “You cannot all day long play with fire. A fire will start.”

