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War in Syria takes an ethnic turn

By Salman Rafi

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Are Russia, Iran, Turkey and Syria trying to reverse the gains Kurds have made against Islamic State in Syria? The official narrative from Damascus still harps on the need to clear the region of IS terrorists and consolidate the region. But as the ‘civil war’ drags, many other ethnic and religious minorities are feeling the pinch. Tensions will rise further after the defeat of IS. Various ethnic groups engaged in militant conflict on one side or the other will make the situation explosive and too complex to be resolved amicably. If the war expands, they should be invited for talks along with major players. Or else, the many fragile Arab states will find themselves on the verge of ethnic fragmentation and may eventually collapse.

Despite certain “understanding” reached between the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in their August 26 meeting, the ground realities of Syria have once again started to change along with competing positions of various actors involved in the conflict.

Smoke rises from the Syrian border town of Jarablus as it is pictured from the Turkish town of Karkamis, in the southeastern Gaziantep province, Turkey, August 24, 2016. REUTERS/Stringer

Kurds and the Syrian army are going head to head in Syria and many regional and extra regional states have directly plunged into the war that may intensify ethnic fault lines and send shock waves across the Middle East.

With US supporting the Kurds against the Syrian army, and Turkey and Russia supporting the Syrian army, Kurds in Iraq, Iran and Turkey will be forced to respond to this war, and the various ethnic minorities will be, as a result, pushed back further.

While the war against the Islamic State (IS) may be finally won, the ethnic conflict brewing in Syria is showing dangerous signs of escalation to a point where the modern Middle East, which was created through a “surgical operation” after World War I, may yet again turn out to be a problem unto itself.

Reports of attacks in the city of al-Hasakah by (the U.S.-supported) Kurdish militias on the Syrian army or vice versa have started to appear five days ago.

The fighting in al-Hasakah, which is located in the mainly Kurdish-held north-eastern part of the country, marks the most violent confrontation between the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) militia and Damascus in more than five years of (civil) war.

The conflict is taking place under the shadow of U.S. forces who have strong presence in the city and are leading the YPG.

YPG, which has been at the heart of US fight against IS for quite some time, appears to be playing an important role against Syrian army too, and by default, against Russia, Iran and Turkey.

Following an eyeball to eyeball situation involving US and Syrian jets, Washington has made it clear it would “take whatever action is necessary” to defend the special operators on the ground.

States like Saudi Arabia have found in this fighting yet another opportunity to damage the Syrian army and undo its gains against IS. Riyadh has proposed financial and military aid to Syrian Kurdish armed groupings for continuation of the fight against Syrian governmental forces.

While the past five years had seen considerable co-operation between Kurds and the Syria army, Saudi Arabia had been repeatedly offering support to Kurdish combat actions against the Syrian army and the main condition for getting the aid was, and still is, a continuation of fight across Syria where Kurdish fighters are present.

The war is not only expanding in Syria but also taking an ugly ethnic turn that would jeopardize the already dicey ground situation.

The success of Kurds in Syria against IS had certainly helped them carve out a region for themselves, making them a powerful stakeholder in Syria and a direct contender for determining Syria’s future, with or without Assad.

They are looking for consolidation which they might not be able to gain without the US support.

An official within the Democratic Union party (PYD), one of the dominant Kurdish parties in Syria, said that the warning by the U.S. did not go far enough.

“The Pentagon took a stand earlier on, but we need more,” said Gharib Hasso. “The silence of the international coalition is not good. The war is expanding,” he said.

This particular understanding stems from an imagined or true realization that Russia, Iran, Turkey and Syria have agreed to reverse the gains Kurds have had so far against IS.

Abdula Salam Ahmad, a PYD official, said: “This was a result of a consensus between Russia, Iran, Syria and Turkey to foil the gains the Kurds have made in Syria. Turkey is not happy with their recent victory in Manbij ... Turkey wants to stop the Kurds.”

On the contrary, the official narrative from Syria is the one based upon the imperative of “clearing” the region of IS terrorists and the related need to consolidate Syria on national lines to prevent its fragmentation.

The fighting between ‘national’ and ‘ethnic’ consolidation is of such nature as would certainly make Syria’s a typical “civil war”, but the one in which many other ethnic and religious minorities would have to feel the pinch.

Many fear for the well-being of Arabs and other minorities in the Kurdish-dominated city. According to some reports, thousands of non-Kurds, including members of the Christian community, have fled to villages as the fighting intensified.

With ‘minority’ ethnic groups feeling the pressure of the fight for control between ‘majority’ ethnic groups, the ethnic question is most likely to assume a lot of significance and, given the Middle East’s diverse ethnic landscape, may affect more than one country.

Were an ‘ethnic conflict’ to brew in the region, the many fragile Arab states will find themselves on the verge of ethnic fragmentation and may eventually collapse.

The most stable countries like Egypt (which remains as such due to its army), and Iran, may preserve their territorial integrity and hold their own ground in the game due to strong defense forces and ideological grip of the regime.

Other countries, like Turkey, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar are far more fragile. The latter three enjoy the protection of the West but also remain fragile and heterogeneous.

Tensions will only resurface after the defeat of the IS, because currently there is no apparent understanding or agreements between Arab Sunnis, Arab Shiites, Sunni Kurds, Shia Turkmen, Christians, Yazidis, Shabbaks and so on.

What adds to the problem is that almost all of these ethnic groups are engaged in militant conflict in one way or other, on one side or the other, making the situation explosive and too complex to be resolved amicably by inviting only the major groups to the negotiating table. That is to say, if the war is expanding, the process of negotiations will have to be expanded equally by making it more representative.