Lina Kolesnikova warns that political and social instability will continue to spread across the Middle East and North Africa, and argues that civil society could play a key role in pushing back Islamist hegemony

SPREADING I

Last year, four Arab countries – Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen – joined the sad list of failed states whose central authorities are unable to fulfil their role of the effective controllers over their national territories. While the situations are somehow different in these countries, there are still many similarities. Triggered and "facilitated" by various internal and external influences, they are the result of multi-year ethnic and religious tensions, as well as dysfunctions in the political, socioeconomic and cultural spheres. While only four countries have joined the list thus far, the overall region might be on the edge of further problems, and as-yet unknown players will have to face and to suggest solutions to multiple issues.

Let us touch the history to get a view on origins of current turmoil. In the context of international affairs, the Middle East has been a troubled region for many decades – even if one keeps the Israeli-Palestinian stalemate aside. After half a millennium of Ottoman rule, the region came under Western (European) domination in the inter-war period. Agreements concerning the creation of individual states made by and between Britain and France, were named by historian David Fromkin as "the peace to end of all peace". New states were artificial, not matching any existing national, tribal or religious identities. As Kofi Annan rightly mentioned at the Munich security conference in February 2015, "The Middle East has been shaped as much by outside forces as internal dynamics".

After the Second World Was and the formation of independent states, the region became an arena of bipolar domination by the US and the USSR. But the collapse of the USSR increased US domination tremendously, albeit only for a while. Today, several controversial missions, the human and financial burdens of the Western presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as economic conditions back home, led the US and local states to reconsider their role in the region. The increasing co-ordination between Russia and China in the UN Security Council has challenged US policy as well. This is most visible in Syria-related developments where, as in some other places, the US went against the then-legitimate leadership. As a result of difference in views, there has not been a coherent Security Council strategy on Syria since 2011.

The Middle East, and the Gulf in particular, used to play a major role in supplying the US with oil; and the US did not hesitate to take an active position in that geography. Today, however, US interests have also been affected by changes in the global energy markets. The revolution in shale oil extraction has placed the US into the top class of world oil producers, and further away from the energy dependence. While the US is less dependent on Gulf oil, the dependence of China and much of Asia on Gulf supplies has deepened (Learning to live with cheaper oil/IMF/2015). The latter consideration means we will see more Asian influence and participation in the Middle East in coming years.

Despite the significant role of "externals" in Middle Eastern affairs, countries of the region have their own agendas and problems too. States in the region are undoubtedly struggling with the changing dynamics of global power, but they are also struggling with their own internal political, socio-economic and cultural challenges as well. Ideological conflicts of the right and the left receded in the last decades of the 20th Century, and the politics of sectarian and communal identity rose to the fore. Regional powers, on their own, fuel the situation by providing funds, arms, training, military advisers or free passage to one

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side or another. Turkey, for example, has struggled with the Kurdish issue and has sharp disagreements with the United States and Europe over the rise of ISIS, and with Russia and Iran over the future fate of the president Assad in Syria.

Although there are some similarities between the four above-mentioned new failed states – including their authoritarian regimes, low national unity and, sometimes, dramatic external influences – they have failed for different reasons. Syria and Iraq (in its post-US invasion period) could have avoided collapse through basic power sharing and accommodation of some opponents in the political system and institutions of the state, had they done so in a timely manner. After Gaddafi's fall, Libya found itself left with hardly any state institutions or political system to work with. Yemen, meanwhile, collapsed even before the uprisings, mainly due to powerless governance structures and the lack of water and economic resources that have aggravated regional and tribal divisions.

Civil unrest, political instability and extremism threaten the security of the whole MENA region

The conflict between Sunni and Shia movements, states and non-state actors has proven so far to be the defining regional conflict of this century. The cultural and historical division between Persians and Arabs has reinforced the Sunni–Shia split. The current Sunni Arab distrust of the Persian Shia Iran, aggravated by clashing national and ideological interests, has fuelled instability in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Further to it, the situation in Iraq had a profound impact across the region, as it gave rise to multiple, possibly false, expectations. For example, by destroying the Ba'thist regime in Iraq during and after its intervention there between 2003 and 2011, the US inadvertently caused the effective handover of Baghdad to Iranian influence. One of the most troubled post-invasion decisions was disbandment of the old security forces. Hundreds of thousands of trained and disgruntled soldiers and policemen found themselves "lustrated" and out there in the streets.

Demographics became another major factor. In addition to cultural and religious differences, current regional demographic trends are destabilising factors as well. The Middle East has one of the world's youngest and fastest-growing populations. Known as "youth bulges," these demographic tsunamis have overwhelmed the inadequate political, economic, and educational infrastructures in many countries in the region. Lack of access to education, lack of jobs, and deficiencies or simply barriers for meaningful political participation fuel discontent among youths who readily share it and organise themselves for actions with the use of modern communication technology. As more than 40 per cent of regional inhabitants are between the ages of 15 and 29, this demographic bulge will continue to have a substantial effect on political stability across the region in years to come.

Civil society remains at "non-existent" level in the Arab world. In theory, it may play a key role in pushing back Islamist hegemony, keeping social system cohesive. But in countries where civil society was weak, it was either overtaken by better-organised religious movements, by more powerful sectarian divisions, or by a resurging state. This is particularly true for countries where internal and external forces pushed previous "uniting forces" of authoritarian powers away (as in Iraq or Libya). Meanwhile most regimes are deeply sceptical of civil society and, deliberately, prefer Islamist organisations to fill up the social space. Therefore, one may observe all four countries lacking institutions that could deal with the lack of freedom, bad governance, social and gender inequality, high population growth and large-scale

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youth unemployment.

In this context of regional agenda, there is a new role for the Kurdish question. The Peshmerga militia of the Kurdistan Regional Government, an autonomous area in north-eastern Iraq, took advantage of the chaos caused by the collapse of the Iraqi security forces and occupied the city of Kirkuk – long considered by Kurds to be theirs (a claim long denied by the central government in Baghdad). Arming (part of) the Kurdish population now to fight against ISIS might well be seen by that population as a sign of acceptance and, eventually, a carte blanche for the future development of the Kurdish agenda across Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Any unification of Kurdish population in these three countries might well be a prologue for further mighty shifts in regional power.

The population outflow from Syria has already caused the largest humanitarian disaster of recent times and changed the demography of Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey for the longer term and in unpredictable ways. The conflicts in Libya and Iraq have also caused massive population movements into neighbouring countries. In this context, Saudi Arabia may be heavily impacted if the situation in Yemen continues to worsen. In Jordan, where King Abdullah's rule has been shattered by Arab Spring protests and adverse economy, almost ten per cent of the population is now Syrian. This has placed even more strain on Jordan's small economy, scarce water resources and limited social services, creating rising resentment among the local population. For the moment, the refugee issue remains a humanitarian and socio-economic burden, but if current trends continue it will inevitably transform into a political and security challenge.

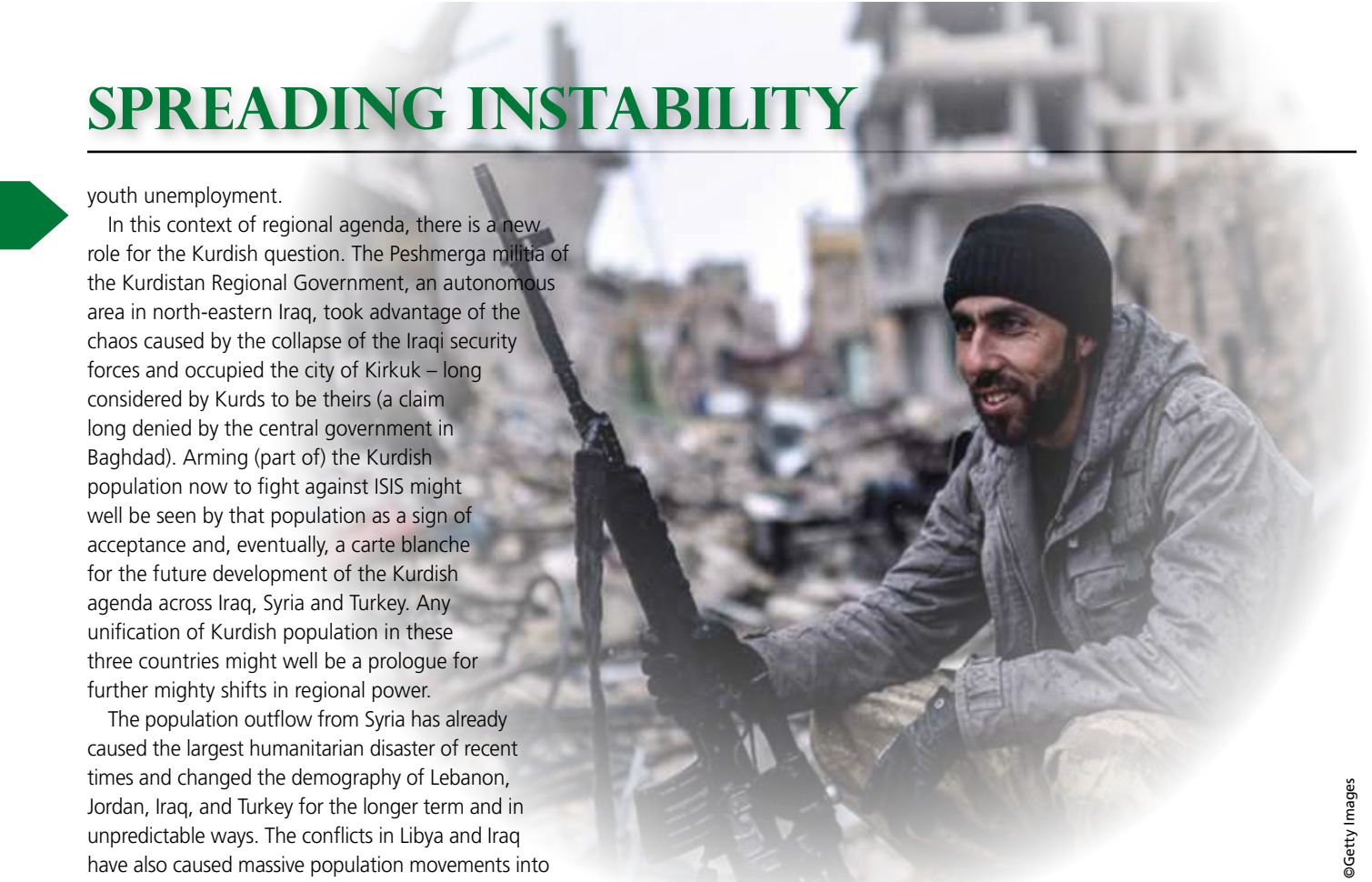
Meanwhile ISIS has become the largest radical threat in the region's modern history. It challenges political borders and order, and is proposing political identities and governance paradigms. Sunni-Shia conflict intensified throughout the Levant and reached Yemen. Today, ISIS can be seen as the Sunni response to Shia-dominated Iraqi government's heavy-handed alienation, marginalisation and repression of the Sunni Arab in Iraq. The Sunni minority in Iraq may move back across the border to seize territory in Iraq.

The Houthi movement of Yemen is the latest non-state group to develop the ambition and capacity to dominate a state. Kurdish militia are part of a federal state in Iraq, but are fighting for autonomy in Syria. Dozens, even hundreds, of Shia and Sunni militias and militant groups are challenging state authority or waging internal war, from Mauritania through Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, through Syria and Iraq and all the way to Yemen. A few, in Syria, are non-Islamist nationalist groups fighting to unseat the Assad dictatorship and build a new republican Syria in its place.

Sadly, Syria seems destined to continue down the road of ruin in 2015, but the coming year might also see some turning points. The armed force that the US and its allies are training is supposed to come on line and will enter Syria. If it makes any headway against ISIS today, it is also going to come to blows with the Assad regime. The US, EU and Russia must decide whether they stick to their current policies or will try to look for new approaches when dealing with the Syrian political leadership. Russia's talks with Assad and the opposition, as well as the latest announcements of potential US-Assad talks, might be the first signs of changing appetites of the main players.

Developments in the mix of forces and interventions in Syria in 2015 could create new realities on the ground. The Syrian conflict seems set to go on for years, but military and political developments in that fluid situation might continue to surprise, creating at some points more devastation and bloodshed, and at others new potential opportunities for negotiation, de-escalation, and the search for a final political settlement. ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra are likely to remain dominant forces in much of Syria, but could be increasingly constrained if the US-regional alliance can stand up an alternative armed force and include some regime targets on its target list. Sunni support for the coalition and its appointed rebels will grow, mainly in recognition of the fact that the alliance is serious about political change, the departure of Assad, and a new inclusive political order in Damascus.

In the attempt to rebuild national stability, it is important to realise that civil society is an ally in reclaiming public space and social power from Islamist or sectarian narratives, and is a key factor in creating stable and sustainable state structures. In the long run, a healthy civil and political society provides the living link between state and society, and provides the bedrock for state stability and the main antidote from radical movements.



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A Kurdish marksman celebrates after ISIS troops were forced from Kobane on the Syrian border with Turkey

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