

BY ANDREA BÖHM

During the past 15 years, Iraq has been the subject of numerous obituaries written by foreign policy experts and journalists – including myself. After the United States and its allies brought down Saddam Hussein in 2003, the country seemed constantly on the verge of collapse. Lately, however, it has become a source of better news. In late 2017, the government in Baghdad declared victory over the Islamic State (IS). Car bombs have become rare. Another round of elections has been held. Oil exports have picked up. And so has nightlife in Baghdad. Travel companies offer “adventure holidays” to foreigners. Is Iraq finally on the path to stabilization?

Making predictions about a nation state so volatile is presumptuous. But with a fresh look, it is possible to better comprehend its dynamics.

Over the past decades, several key words have shaped the debate on Iraq: religious sectarianism and its rifts between Shia and Sunni, ethnic hostility between Arabs and Kurds and the struggle over oil. While all of the above contribute to the country’s fragility, they also lead us to believe that this fragility is something inherently “Iraqi,” “Arab” or “Middle Eastern,” and therefore abnormal.

That is misleading. The Middle East is afflicted by a set of global challenges that increasingly impact every other part of the world as well, albeit in different ways and dimensions: the crisis of the nation state, the volatility of a globalized economy and its impact on labor, and the effects of climate change. What makes Iraq an exceptional case is the agglomeration and mutual acceleration of these crises – and the often surprising resilience of its people.

Iraq’s prospects of becoming a stable nation state were not exactly promising when it was founded after World War I. The quasi-colonial British project with arbitrary borders was soon burdened with a toxic sequence of military coups, superpower meddling, a particularly brutal dictatorship, wars against its neighbors Iran and Kuwait and



Grit and grind: Iraqi youths train for karate on a mountainside in Sulaymaniya in January of this year.

PICTURE ALLIANCE/REUTERS

Surprising endurance

When it comes to Iraq, it is easy to expect the worst, but the country refuses to collapse

crippling international sanctions.

The country’s social and physical infrastructure was already in ruins when the US-led intervention began in 2003. A quick military victory was followed by a disastrous occupation and a golden opportunity for other actors to expand: Iran on the one hand and Al Qaeda and the IS on the other, with the latter carving out a third of the country’s territory for its caliphate in 2014. The end of Iraq as we know it seemed near.

Why didn’t this happen? First of all, neither the US nor Iran, the two main foreign antagonists in Iraq, wanted the country to fall apart. Both became de facto allies forcing IS to abandon its caliphate (and killing thousands of civilians in the process). Both also opposed the Kurdish vote for independence in 2017, which Baghdad blocked militarily with the blessing of Washington and Tehran.

Another factor holding the country together seems less obvious: Iraqi nationalism. The winner of the last parliamentary election in May 2018 was none other than Muqtada al-Sadr, the former Shia firebrand whose militia wreaked havoc in the years of the US-led occupation. Today he has joined

the political process. He champions an Iraqi identity and openly opposes Iranian influence.

His success must be taken with several grains of salt: Voter participation reached a new low at only 45 percent and al-Sadr’s alliance must seek compromises with the runner-up, Hadi Al-Amiri, a Shia leader with close ties to Tehran. Still, the support for al-Sadr by a large part of the poorer Shia population and even a growing number of Sunnis indicates that many Iraqis are tired of sectarianism and being bossed around by their aggressive Persian neighbor. Iraq and Iran have Shia majorities, but many Iraqi Shias value their Arab identity at least as highly as they value their religious affiliation.

Even in the Kurdish part of the country, an Iraqi passport is more popular than one may imagine. Despite the overwhelming vote for independence in September 2017, many Kurds saw the referendum for what it was: a maneuver by Masoud Barzani, then-president of the Kurdish autonomous region, to stay in power despite accusations of plundering the region’s oil wealth. Many Kurds want autonomy *within* an Iraqi nation state, but most of all they demand decent

public services, jobs and less corruption.

That the borders of the Iraqi nation state have proved more stable than expected does not mean the state is doing well.

Its fate is becoming increasingly intertwined with the forces of a globalized economy and the growing job crisis in the Middle East. The “gold rush” of privatizations after 2003 provided lucrative contracts for American companies and huge kickbacks for a new Iraqi elite, but it never created the thriving private sector and the jobs that were promised.

This partly fueled the uprising against the occupation. It also exacerbated the discrimination of the once dominant Sunni minority, as resources were now directed towards the once suppressed Shia majority. Al Qaeda and later IS dexterously tapped into the growing Sunni resentment.

According to the World Bank, several million Iraqis are still in need of humanitarian assistance and a quarter of its working-age population is either jobless or underemployed. Agricultural production has declined by 40 percent, which makes Iraq more dependent on Iranian imports and thereby pushes

it deeper into the confrontation between Washington and Tehran.

Water scarcity and periods of drought are further endangering food security. Both are aggravated by climate change. It is a macabre twist of fate that the region of the Persian Gulf is already much more severely affected by climate change than the countries that consume its oil.

Of all the Gulf states, Iraq is the least prepared for that scenario. Public services are at best inadequate while contingency plans for ecological disasters simply do not exist. Corruption is rampant. Last summer, thousands of people in the southern and predominantly Shia oil city of Basra took to the streets to protest poisonous tap water and long power cuts during temperatures of almost 50 degrees Celsius. Among them were many young Shia men who had fought against the Islamic State up north, only to return and join the masses of unemployed in their hometown.

The unrest in Basra highlighted two important developments. First, protests against corruption, poverty and pollution continue in Iraq as well as in other Arab countries, where the economic and ecological situation is worse today

than on the eve of the Arab Spring in 2011.

Second, Iraq’s new model of “militia governance” has clearly met its limits. Muqtada al-Sadr and Hadi Al-Amiri may have opposing views of Iran’s role in the region. But like several other leading politicians, they both rely on their well-armed militias as the backbone of their political aspirations. These militias have proved to be crucial ground troops in the fight against IS. They are also job machines. Their mostly poor recruits receive a steady income and, of equal importance, social recognition as “heroic holy warriors” seeking martyrdom.

Now that the war against IS is over – at least for the time being – funds for armed groups are becoming more scarce and those fighters who want to return to civilian life are demanding better opportunities.

The country is once more at a crossroads. Either its political stakeholders move towards a policy of the common good – which would require sincere efforts to stem corruption and to use public resources for economic reconstruction benefiting all groups – or sectarianism and clientele politics will thrive again and channel resources, including donor money, to the partly armed ethnic and religious support bases of the country’s strongmen. This would accelerate a Shia-centric state-building process mostly at the expense of the Sunni part of the population, but also at the expense of Kurds and poorer Shia.

When it comes to Iraq, it is easy to expect the worst. Another summer without electricity and clean water may provoke a much more violent protest than demonstrations and barricades. Even Iran may want to push its Iraqi protégés towards a more inclusive and responsible policy in order not to endanger its own sphere of influence. It certainly did not escape the attention of Tehran that one of the few buildings set on fire during the protests in Basra was the Iranian consulate.

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BY WOLFRAM LACHER

Indifference to chaos

What Libya tells us about Europe’s role in its unstable neighborhood

For the past four years, US and European policymakers have thrown up their hands in despair at their inability to influence the course of the war in Syria. Russia, Iran and Turkey, they complain, have relegated them to secondary roles. But the West’s failure to contain the conflicts in Libya since 2014 tells a different story.

Libya is not a theater of intense rivalry between major powers and regional heavyweights. Meddling by states such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt is not an inevitable consequence of the new multipolar disorder in the Middle East and North Africa. Rather, the United States and Europeans have stood by – and eventually joined in – as cavalier interference by minor powers turned Libya into a playing field without rules. The Libyan crisis continues to deepen, not least due to a stunning indifference among Western governments to the chaos on Europe’s doorstep.

In December 2015, Western states were the main backers of a fragile agreement to overcome the political divides plaguing Libyan factions and form a Government of National Accord (GNA). While that agreement had many flaws, the principal cause of its failure was the continued foreign support – from the UAE, Egypt and France – of the leading opponent of the deal, Khalifa Haftar, who now effectively controls eastern Libya. The GNA has survived in Tripoli largely thanks to its status as the internationally recognized government. Meanwhile,

institutional divides have persisted and Haftar has advanced. Attempts to broker a deal that would include Haftar in a unified government have proven elusive.

However, it is important not to overstate the role of foreign actors in Libya’s conflicts, whose fundamental driver is an ever-evolving power struggle between the country’s innumerable factions. External actors did not push Libya into civil war; rather, Libyan conflict parties mobilized foreign support as the struggles escalated in 2014.

Haftar, in particular, has enjoyed substantial foreign backing. But most armed groups sustain themselves by tapping into Libya’s flourishing war economy, siphoning off state funds through a variety of licit and illicit schemes.

A look at the key foreign players in Libya tells us much about the extent and limits of external involvement. By far, the leading foreign meddler is the UAE, a small, faraway state that has little tangible interest in Libya and remains unaffected by the fallout of the Libyan crisis. Next comes Egypt, which is directly affected by instability in Libya and has a major stake in developments there but has long ceased to be a leading regional power. Libya is the only regional hotspot where Egypt now plays a notable role.

The regional heavyweights Saudi Arabia and Iran have not displayed any interest in Libya. The UAE and Egypt accuse their regional foes – Qatar and Turkey – of backing “terrorists” in Libya, but evidence of Qatari or Turkish support to Libyan factions is scarce, and to the extent that it does exist, it pales in comparison to Emirati and Egyptian support for Haftar.

This is the extent of regional involvement. There is much talk of Russia, which has printed currency for the parallel central bank in eastern Libya, deployed military advisors with Haftar and simultaneously reached out to a range of other players in Libya. But there is much to suggest that Russian actions in Libya are first and foremost a cheap way of signaling that it can act as a spoiler if ignored. Russian support for Haftar only materialized after he had already emerged as a key player in the east, and after the onset of US and French counter-terrorism assistance to Haftar.

Among Western governments, Italy is by far the most active in Libya. This is unsurprising, as Italy is most directly affected, but also telling, as it underscores the absence of serious engagement by major powers. France has stood out for its erratic, short-lived diplomatic initiatives and modest mil-

itary support to Haftar, pioneering the outreach of other Western states to the warlord in the east. The embarrassing diplomatic spats between France and Italy over Libya in the past year are not conflicts over substance; rather, they are a manifestation of the Elysée’s casual attitude towards Libya policy, and of populist rhetoric by Italian politicians.

US disengagement from anything other than counter-terrorism began under President Barack Obama – following the killing of the US ambassador in Benghazi in 2012 – and has accelerated under Trump. A defining moment came in July 2018, when the US, worried about rising oil prices as it prepared to impose new sanctions on Iran, successfully pressured the Emiratis and forced Haftar to lift his blockade on oil exports from ports under his control. The episode showed that the US could solve major problems in Libya if it cared – but it quite obviously does not.

Amid international indifference, Libya has become a place where anything goes. It is the only country on earth where, when an airstrike happens, the responsible party could be any of at least two local and four foreign governments – but in many cases, it will never be publicly identified.

The UAE was a forerunner in this regard when it bombed armed groups in Tripoli in 2014 – apparently without even informing the US. Since then, a number of airstrikes, believed to have been carried out by Egypt, have caused significant civilian casualties. As in other countries, US strikes against purported terrorists are also regularly followed by local allegations that the victims were innocent civilians; but contrary to such cases in Yemen or Pakistan, the international media has yet to investigate such claims in Libya.

The UN arms embargo offers another striking illustration. The UN Panel of Experts meticulously documents blatant violations of the embargo by regional, Eastern European and Western states – which the UN Security Council then carefully ignores. It has recently moved to impose targeted sanctions on selected Libyan “spoilers” – but these are, without exception, politically expendable losers. Powerful players with ties to foreign states can be certain of their impunity.

While not initially among the foreign actors who turned Libya into a free-for-all, the Europeans are now doing their share to keep it that way. The European approach to curbing migration from Libya’s shores, spearheaded by Italy, amounts to refole- ment by proxy. Europeans are pro-

viding support to Libyan coastguard and interior ministry units that are themselves deeply involved in the economy of migrant extortion. For now, the European approach has been grimly successful in reducing migrant crossings, but at tremendous human cost – and by trampling international law and human rights.

For those who claim to defend a rules-based international order, Libya would be a good place to start. As a first step, this would require European governments to transcend their puzzling disinterest in the turmoil in their immediate neighborhood. Admittedly, there are few incentives to do so for leaders who are driven by short-term priorities. Libya seldom features in the media, who have trouble getting in and often find Libya’s complexity hard to communicate. Libya’s role as a transit country for migration – which all Europeans recognize as strategic – has moved to the background, as a result of short-sighted policies that undermine the overall objective of stabilizing Libya. And Libya’s conflicts are hardly tempting for European leaders with prospects of quick wins that would allow them to shine in domestic politics. But if Europeans want to help solve a crisis that directly affects them – and prevent others from deepening it further – they need to be much more strategic, assertive and united.

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