The Middle East Mess

Five things you need to know about what's going on in Iraq and Syria—and why it matters to the United States

BY PATRICIA SMITH

When the last U.S. troops left Iraq almost three years ago, the Obama administration celebrated the end of an eight-year-long war. But the celebration seems to have been premature. As the civil war in neighboring Syria has spiraled out of control—and inflamed ancient hostilities between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims—the violence has spilled across the border into Iraq and now threatens to engulf the entire region.

1 Who are the Sunnis and Shi'ites, and why do they hate each other?

The rift between Islam's two main sects, Sunnis and Shi'ites, dates back almost 1,400 years to the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 A.D. There was a struggle over who would be Islam's next leader, and that dispute grew into a deep division. The two sects became political rivals, and a long history of discrimination, persecution, and violence on both sides followed.

There are some differences in how Sunnis and Shi'ites practice Islam—such as how, where, and when they pray—but both groups believe that the Koran is the holy book and Muhammad was the world's last prophet.

About 85 percent of the world's Muslims are Sunni, but Shi'ites are the majority in Iraq and Iran.
2. So how did we go from a 7th-century argument to today?

For centuries, the Middle East was part of the Ottoman Empire, a Muslim caliphate stretching from North Africa through present-day Iraq. The modern roots of today’s chaos go back to the collapse of that empire at the end of World War I. In 1917, before the war was even over, Mark Sykes, a British colonel, and François Georges-Picot, a French diplomat, secretly drew some wavy, near-linear lines on a map of the Middle East to divide it into French and British spheres of influence. But the Sykes-Picot Agreement didn’t put borders where they’d make sense for the people who lived there, so in many cases Sunnis and Shiites were thrown together. Only force could maintain this system: First colonial rulers and then kings and dictators kept a lid on tensions for decades.

Then in 2003, the invasion of Iraq by the U.S. and its allies upset the apple cart. With Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein’s ouster, long-suppressed tensions between Sunnis and Shiites exploded. The situation grew more complicated with the post-invasion Arab Spring revolt in 2011, especially in Syria. The protests there evolved into a civil war pitting the majority Sunni population against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Assad is an Alawite (a Shiite sect) and his government has long sidelined Sunnis. As the violence in Syria escalated, it began spilling across the border into Iraq. That’s where ISIS comes in.

3. ISIS sounds more like a rock band than an army. What is it?

Shahristb stars as Iraq and Syria’s ISIS is a radical Sunni Muslim group whose goal is to establish a state governed by strict Islamic law without regard for present-day borders. At press time, ISIS had captured significant territory in northern Iraq and northern Syria (see map), effectively erasing the borders that Sykes-Picot drew a century ago. (Another chunk of northern Iraq was already controlled by Iraqi Kurds.)

4. Is the U.S. doing anything about it?

In June, President Obama sent 300 American military advisers to Iraq to help the struggling Iraqi Army and increased surveillance flights over Iraq. At press time, he was sending U.S. air strikes against ISIS in both Iraq and Syria to stem its advance and prevent the Iraqi government from collapsing.

“We will be helping Iraqis as they take the fight to terrorists who threaten the Iraqi people, and American interests as well,” Obama said. But at the same time, the president has made clear that U.S. combat forces will not return to Iraq, where 4,245 Americans were killed during the eight-year war. “Ultimately,” he said, “this is something that is going to have to be solved by the Iraqis.”

When Obama ended the Iraq war in 2011, he considered it a major accomplishment. But now he finds himself pulled back into the fighting.

Some experts say there may not be much the U.S. can do to help.

5. Why does a conflict thousands of miles away matter to the U.S.?

The Middle East is a fragile region that’s already been severely stressed by more than 2 million refugees streaming out of Syria and into neighboring countries. Now we could see a new refugee crisis, as more Iraqis flee from ISIS. The U.S. has many allies in the region—including Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan—who are threatened by the escalating chaos in Iraq.

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The situation also has economic implications. Iraq has been a major oil producer. If the fighting continues, it could result in a big drop in Iraq’s output. That could send the price of oil soaring—bad news for the U.S. economy.


But the biggest threat to the U.S.—and the world—is terrorism. If the Iraqi government collapses, it would create a vast lawless territory in the heart of the Middle East. That could provide a safe haven for Islamic terrorists—exactly what happened in Afghanistan when it was controlled by the Taliban before the 9/11 attacks in 2001. The Taliban allowed the terrorist group Al Qaeda to operate freely and plan the attacks on New York and Washington that killed almost 3,000 people.

But even if the Iraqi government can’t—or won’t—prevent ISIS forces from taking over the rest of the country, security experts agree it’s unlikely the Iraqi Army will be able to recapture the territory in northern Iraq that ISIS now controls.

Says Middle East expert Aaron David Miller of the Wilson Center, “Large areas of Iraq are now under the control of groups who will plot and conspire not only against our friends in the region but arguably, without question, against the United States.”