

Postwar turmoil in the Gulf

The Mideast has a particularly infuriating nature. Just when you think one major problem has been solved, up pops another.

Now that the fighting appears ended — at least for the present — and Saddam Hussein defanged, many people assume the Gulf crisis is over. Not so.

Over the past few days, Iraq's political landscape has begun to quake as long-suppressed political, ethnic and religious grievances surface with rapidly mounting violence. Revolt has broken out against Saddam's regime in Basra, Iraq's second largest city, as well as in five other towns in southern Iraq.

According to some reports, an Iranian-style Islamic republic has been declared in southern Iraq by Shia Muslims, who make up 55% of the nation's population. Heavy fighting is said to be going on as Shia militants battle units of Saddam's Janissaries, the Republican Guard. There are rumors that Saddam's son, Odai, and the governor of Basra, were killed in the fighting.

In what could be a highly significant development, rebels are reported to have seized the two holy cities of Shia Islam — Kerbala and Najaf.

Off in Tehran, an Iraqi Shia government in exile says it will shortly move to Iraq to assume power. Equally ominous, in northern Iraq anti-government Kurdish rebels may have taken over the major cities of Erbil and Sulimaniyah. Calls are coming from Kurdish exile groups for the formation of an independent Kurdish state.

As this column has been noting for some time, one of the greatest dangers of war in the Gulf was that a defeated Iraq would disintegrate. The process now appears well under way.

Iraq is a totally artificial nation created by British imperialism after World War I. Its chronic instability has been due to the fact that three disparate groups — Kurds, Sunni and Shia Muslims — were lumped together to create Iraq, the Yugoslavia of the Mideast.

For decades, minority Sunni Muslims have dominated the government and army, battling Kurdish revolts and attempts by Shias in the south to link up politically with neighboring Shia Iran.

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One of the major reasons Saddam went to war with Iran in 1980 was to thwart what he saw as the threat that Iran would try to annex southern Iraq.

Neither the Shias of southern Iraq nor the Kurds in the north are considered to possess sufficient force or organization to overthrow Saddam's regime. Government forces may once again, as so many times in the past, put down the revolts with maximum brutality.

But there is a real danger that this time the weakened regime and its badly battered army may be unable to crush the uprisings, leaving both the north and south — where Iraq's oil wells are located — in a state of insurrection or chaos.

If a coup does occur in Baghdad and Saddam is overthrown, the situation may go from bad to disastrous. The Iranians will very likely intensify their so far discreet encouragement of a revolt by Iraqi Shias and formation of an Islamic republic in the south.

Having massed heavy troops formations just across the border from Basra, the Iranians also have the option of military intervention. Chances are, however, that the cautious, wily Iranian leader, Hashemi Rafsanjani, will continue to stir the Iraqi pot and not take military action — at least until the bulk of U.S. forces in the region are withdrawn.

Up north, the Kurds might carve out a de facto republic. They may have been receiving secret U.S. and Israeli support of late — as in the past. But deep political and tribal divisions among the Kurds could prevent them from severing Kurdistan from Iraq proper. Neighboring Turkey and Iran, both with large Kurdish minorities, might also aid Baghdad in preventing formation of a Kurdish state.

All this puts the U.S.-led coalition in a predicament. A key goal of the bombing campaign against Iraq was to make life unbearable for its citizens, so provoking a revolt against Saddam. Now that revolts are breaking out, the allies are faced with the prospect that Iraq will fragment and turn into another Lebanon. No one wants this to happen — save, perhaps, Iran.

So Bush and his allies are confronted by the dilemma of wanting to be rid of Saddam while needing him, or some other strongman, to keep Iraq together. Anyone who thinks a western-style democracy can be installed in Iraq simply does not know that turbulent nation and its murderous politics. A Shia takeover of southern Iraq, in fact, could prove as dangerous to the U.S. oil protectorates of Arabia as Saddam's legions.

As predicted, the defeat of Saddam leaves militant Iran the big victor — and the big threat — in the Gulf. The U.S. aided Saddam in the first Gulf war to block the Iranian threat. Then the U.S. turned and smashed Iraq. Now, a decade and two wars later, we're back to square one.